

A Weak Conscience Seared by Legalism

Ryan Fullerton | *illbehonest.com*

I want to read to you one verse this evening. I want to read you one verse this evening. And I'll read it just after I share with you what I'm going to be speaking on. And I'll share with you what I'm going to be speaking on just after I pray.

So let's pray together. Father, You told us that without You we could do nothing, and we believe it, even though our flesh would rage with pride and try to convince us we'll be okay. By faith, we believe we can do nothing. Lord, faith is the assurance of things hoped for and we want to put our hope in what You have promised. Lord, You said that whoever believes in You would do the work that You do, and greater works than these would he do because You had gone to the Father. Would You allow me to do - it's almost unspeakable, Lord - greater works than You did? Would you equip Your saints so that we could all do greater works than You did because You have gone to the Father; You've ascended, and You've poured out the powerful Holy Spirit. Father, I want to pray that You would give us a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of You. Lord, I want to pray that You would just break chains this evening. Lord, wherever there are those who are in bondage, that You would free them, and wherever there are Christians who are returning to a spirit of slavery, that You would destroy it. Lord, You know that this topic that we're talking about is one that has plagued me, hurt me. I just pray that I would be able to pass a little bit of the help I've received on. Lord, I pray that You'd give me clarity from Your Word. Lord, that You'd give me prophecy if there's something particular that needs to be pointed out. And that You would just allow us to know that Your Spirit was among us, speaking to us by Your Word. Now, Lord, let us preach and listen with confidence in Christ who loves us and gave Himself for us, and promises to be with us always, even to the end of the age. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

The topic I want to talk to you about tonight is one that can cause you either great pain or tremendous pleasure. What I want to speak to us about is a topic that can either be pure and perfect - something that can either be pure and perfect - or, dirty and defiled. It can be either good or bad. Seared or soft. I want to speak to you about the conscience. And isn't the conscience where we live? So much of our lives as Christians are lived interacting with our consciences. If the conscience is dirty, there's no good day. If the conscience is pure, there is no bad day, no matter what's happening. If your conscience is clean, communion with God is uninterrupted. All hell can break loose against you and you've got heaven in your soul. If there's a hindrance between you and the Lord, then everything can be going right, and nothing's going right. There's no joy in your soul. And I want to speak to us about the conscience from 1 Timothy 1:5 where we're told the goal of all Christian teaching. The goal of all Paul's teaching, the goal of all Timothy's teaching, the goal of every Sunday school you ever teach, and the goal of every interaction you ever have with a friend is summarized in this one verse.

1 Timothy 1:5. "The aim of our charge..." or as I believe the NASB puts it: "The goal of our instruction." "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

Everything that's ever taught in the name of Christianity ought to have a singular goal: love. If it's not helping people care about other people more, it's not Christian teaching. If it's not warming your heart to care more about God and care more about the people He made, it's not Christian teaching. I don't care how orthodox it is, if it doesn't result in love, it's bent, and crooked, warped, and sinful, and self-condemned. The goal of all Christian teaching is for you to care more about other people for the glory of God. The aim of our instruction is love. And it issues, it flows out of the inside. And the inside of us is described in three ways: We're told that Christian teaching that produces love - that love actually ought to issue out of a pure heart - a heart that's been born again, a heart that's been cleansed, a heart that has pure motives before God. And a good conscience - we'll get to that. And a sincere faith - not like the Pharisees. They prayed in public, they acted holy, they gave their tithes, but it was all to have other people watch them. It wasn't a sincere faith towards God. It was a show faith towards man. And then, the Apostle Paul singles out the importance of a good conscience in producing love.

And it should be clear almost immediately just how very practical this is. It is very practical to think about how much we need a good conscience if we're going to get biblical love. So you think about how abortion is justified in our day. The slaughter of the innocents. Sixty million Americans dead since 1973 - legally. And justified how? In many cases, because it's loving. Loving. It would sacrifice the mother's dreams to have a child at this point, and we want to be loving and let her become all that she was meant to be. So, sacrifice the life of the child so as not to sacrifice the mother's dreams. Or, it's argued that abortion is loving to the child. Because of course, if you're born in poverty or in a family that doesn't want you, that couldn't be a life worth living. So you see what happens is that something is justified in the name of love, but it's not from a biblical conscience. Not from a good conscience at all. Really, it's self-deceived. One in every three women in America by the time they're 40 has had an abortion. So I realize I'm speaking to dear sisters who have had abortions, and men who have helped them get those abortions. And I want to tell you, I'm going to share things with you that will cleanse your conscience. That will let you know freedom and peace and joy.

It should just be immediately apparent that this whole idea of a good conscience is really important in the issue of love. Why do so many churches not practice church discipline? Well, it's not loving. Rebuking, correcting, excluding, putting out. All of that's inconceivable. That can't be loving. And so you've got bad definitions of love moving people into action, and you've got a bad idea of love. You don't have love from a good conscience. A good conscience says, hey, Jesus decides what's loving. And if you read Matthew 18, it's all about love. Go get that brother. Go win that brother. Go get two or three to win that brother. Go get the whole church to try to win that brother. It's all about love and winning the sinner in, and when love divorces itself from the Bible, you don't get love anymore. And the Bible is interested in cultivating love from a good conscience. This is important to know when you're talking about new Christians. I have a friend named Darren. He went on to become a pastor, but when he first got saved, he was smoking pot, he was smoking cigarettes, he was drinking alcohol, he was drinking coffee, and he got saved and he got so convicted, and he quit the coffee and cigarettes right away. But it took a little more conscience informing before it started firing on all cylinders, and he got convicted of what he needed to be convicted of in order to repent and continue to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel.

And so we need to understand the conscience. It's because of misunderstandings about the conscience that so many churches are so small. Now listen, I believe that a lot of churches are small because they're so faithful. I believe that. I believe that in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, a lot of times the remnant is going to be small and there aren't going to be a lot of people that join them. I believe that faithfulness can keep churches small. Did anyone hear me say that? Okay, I said that. Right? And I believe that if your church all becomes about what kind of bread you bake, and what homeschooling curriculum you buy, you're going to be small for the wrong reasons. And you're going to pat yourself on the back for your faithfulness, while you keep people away from the kingdom of God. And that's bad. And so understanding issues of the conscience is critical to living a life of love. The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart, a sincere faith, and a good conscience.

Now, let's just ask: what is the conscience? We're looking at 1 Timothy 1:5. It tells us that love is supposed to come out of a good conscience. What is a conscience? And I think the best place to get a sense of what a conscience is is by watching a conscience in action in Romans 2:14-16. Romans 2:14-16. Let us look at the conscience in action. And as we see the conscience acting; as we see what the conscience does, we get a glimpse of what the conscience is.

The Apostle Paul, you might remember, in the first three chapters of Romans is proceeding like a lawyer against the human race; showing the universal guilt of the human race, and how the whole human race is under the guilt and under the power of sin. And, as he goes and proceeds to do this, he explains that Gentiles - that is non-Jews, people who didn't deal with Moses; didn't have the 10 Commandments; didn't have the Bible; the people Francis Schaeffer called, "the man without the Bible." He says these Gentiles, even though they didn't have the 10 Commandments, nonetheless, they had the law written on their hearts. And their consciences always spoke to them about that law that was written on their hearts. Romans 2:14 says, "For when Gentiles that do not have the law..." They don't have the law of Moses. They don't have the 10 Commandments outside their courtyards. "...By nature, do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law, they show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their consciences also bear witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when according to my gospel God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus." Every single person has the law written on their heart. And we're not talking about this in the way that Hebrews 8 talks about the law written on the heart. When Hebrews 8 talks about the Christian having the law written on their heart, it means that the Christian longs to do the law. Here, when we look at Romans 2, it's just talking about that every person, whether they're a Christian or not, is aware of the law. They know the difference between right and wrong.

I had the privilege of witnessing to two gay friends the other day, and I said to them, "Listen, isn't it amazing that you're living in this time and this culture where I know there's been persecution and hatred against homosexuals, but really, at the end of the day, this is about as easy a time as you can imagine to be gay, and you both feel guilty now." And they're like, "Yeah." Because they have the law written on their hearts. Because their conscience has not been completely silenced. And what the Bible tells us is that the law is written on the heart, so we have this knowledge of right and wrong, we have this knowledge of what's good and bad,

and the conscience is a witness that's always telling us whether we're doing the good or doing the bad. It's bearing witness. It's like having, as one person put it, a prosecuting attorney in your heart and a defense attorney in your heart at the same time. So the attorney at one point is saying, "You are guilty." And then at the next point, it's saying, "You are innocent." That was good. That was bad. There's this constant self-evaluation going on within the heart being done by the conscience as it compares your behaviors, your attitudes, and your actions to God's law. The conscience bears witness. It's like an alarm that goes off when you're about to do the wrong thing. It's like a knife that stabs your heart when you do the wrong thing. And it's constantly reflecting you to you. And it's a bit wrong to say it's part of you, but there's also a sense, isn't there, where it's independent of you. I can close my eyes. They're closed. I can't see you now. I've not figured out how to shut my conscience off. Sadly, there is a way. I'll show you. But it's not easy to silence the conscience. It's there when you go to bed. I believe the reason that so many people stay so busy, so distracted, so constantly needing noise in their ears and visuals in front of their eyes is in many ways, just to keep their conscience at bay. They cannot bear the sound of silence because as soon as you meet silence, there's a sound. And it's the sound of your conscience.

So, the conscience is a witness given by God that reflects whether we're either disobeying God's law or obeying it. It's either excusing us or accusing us all the time. And there's debate about how v. 16 fits into Romans 2, but it does seem that the final judgment is not far off from the eyesight of the conscience. "On that day, when according to my gospel God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus." Your conscience right now is secret. I can't see your conscience. I don't know who in front of me is tormented with guilt, and who is genuinely joyful in the Lord. I don't know. And you can't see mine. Our consciences have a secret operation. But there will come a day when those secrets are all brought up before the Lord. And where the Lord will assess whether we've done right or wrong on the judgment day. And I'm going to tell you, I believe the conscience knows we've done wrong.

Look at Romans 1:32. Romans 1:32. He's speaking about the Gentiles. He's just listed off this whole list of sins. Homosexuality, lesbianism, gossip, slander, disobedience to parents. He's listed off all these things that Kevin pointed out so well. We ought to feel compassionate about when we see them in other people. And he tells us how the Gentiles feel about all these sins they commit. They tell you it doesn't bother them. They tell you it's no big deal. They tell you they stopped feeling guilty about that years ago. Romans 1:32. "Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but give approval to those who practice them." People know that God has decreed the death sentence against their sin. They know that. Deeply. Their consciences remind them that they deserve to die because of their sin. And they gather around them people who go, "that's okay. It's no big deal." "Oh, don't get into that old antiquated morality." "That's all false. That's all lies." "You need to understand that we're free of all that stuff now." And they surround themselves with voices that say it's all okay. But when they put their head on the pillow, or have a moment of silence, it's there. I've done wrong. And I deserve to die. And I wonder how many of you here know you've done wrong and you deserve to die, and tonight will be the time you taste freedom for the first time. Wouldn't that be great? Come out of the shadows? Come out of the secrets? And have your conscience cleansed?

I used to teach a Bible study in prison, and there were a number of men in the Bible study who had killed their wives. One of them denied it for years and years and years and years. And when he finally admitted that he'd killed his wife, they said he changed color. It was just life giving to come clean; to confess.

So, here is a definition. I've been helped out with this. The conscience is that aspect because we're made in the image of God - the conscience is that aspect of us that tells us what's right and what's wrong. The conscience is that aspect of us because we're made in the image of God that witnesses to us about what is right and what is wrong. We're made in the image of God, and God is the kind of God who says, that's good; that's good; that's good. Man alone? Not good. Man with a wife? Very good. He is the God who says what's good, not good, and very good. We're made in His image. And so we have a conscience that bears witness to good, evil, not good, very good. We're made in the image of God and so like God, we cannot help but to witness to the reality of morality. That's what the conscience is. Everyone has one. Only you experience yours. It witnesses to what's going on in your heart regarding God's law - whether you're obeying it and you should be excused, or you're disobeying it and should be accused. And ultimately, all of our secret thoughts will be brought up to the judgment of God on the last day.

This is my second point if you're keeping notes. If you're keeping notes, I'm sorry. I'm just the worst preacher for that. But, here's the second point. We've looked at what the conscience is, and now we want to look at the fact that the conscience has different states. The conscience can be in different states. And I don't mean the conscience can be in Mississippi and Alabama. I mean that it can be in different places before God. It can be in different states. This is implied in the verse. We wouldn't really need to go further than 1 Timothy 1:5. We will go further than 1 Timothy 1:5, but it's implied right there in 1 Timothy 1:5. The goal of our instruction is love from a good conscience. So one of the states that a conscience can be in is it can be good. You can have a good conscience. The implication of the verse is that when you start your Christian life, the conscience isn't as good as it should be and so you need Christian teaching to learn how to walk with a good conscience. The conscience can be in different states. And it's going to benefit us, I think, this evening. It's going to benefit us to think through some of the states the conscience can be in. This isn't exhaustive, but I hope it's helpful.

The first is the conscience can be weak. The conscience can be weak. Look at 1 Corinthians 8. 1 Corinthians 8, if you will. And we'll read verses 7-12. We'll put our fingers on v. 10. 1 Corinthians 8:7-12. The situation is that some of the Corinthians were eating meat sacrificed to idols. And they'd gotten saved; they've realized that Zeus and Hermes and all these idols, they were nothing. They didn't even exist. And so the fact that in Corinth, all the meat in the meat market was sacrificed to idols didn't bother them because all the idols didn't exist. But Paul says in v. 7, not all possess this knowledge. Not every Christian's worked it out. Even though there's only one God, and Zeus and Hermes don't exist, not every Christian has fully appreciated that, fully understood that, fully gotten that. They're worshiping God and God alone, but man, Zeus and Hermes are real, and I don't want anything to do with them. And it says there, "not all possess this knowledge..." this knowledge that there is only one God, and there are no idols, "...but some through former association with idols eat food as really offered to an idol and their conscience being weak is defiled. Food will not commend us to God, we are no

worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do, but take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged if his conscience is weak to eat food offered to idols and so by your knowledge, this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died, thus sinning against your brother and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." The idea here is that some of these Christians, they couldn't get over the connection between the meat and the idols. They couldn't get over it. They couldn't get it out of their mind.

It was like when I got saved. I had been to every nasty punk show before I got saved, and when I got to Bible college and found all these Christians listening to Christianized punk music, I couldn't understand how it could be good. It couldn't possibly be decent, because it had too many associations with the evil I had come out of for me to even conceive of it possibly being good. And these Christians in Corinth had so many memories of the pagan temples and so many memories of the wickedness that happened there, that the idea of eating meat that was sacrificed to those gods, they just couldn't handle that. They couldn't tolerate that. And so their consciences were weak. They were weak because they were not walking in the fullness of what God has revealed. And what God has revealed is that Zeus and Hermes don't exist. Mohammad and Allah don't exist. Vishnu doesn't exist. All the gods, all the false gods of this world, don't even exist, so you can sacrifice food all you want to them, they don't exist! But these believers had not been fully able to appreciate all of God's truth. Now, we're going to get into this later, but notice Paul's approach is not: "What's wrong with you not appreciating all of God's revealed truth?" His answer is: care for the weak brother. Don't offend him. He doesn't understand everything in the Bible, but he understands the things that save him. Don't hurt him. His conscience is weak. And there are people in our day who think that any touching of alcohol is a sin even though Jesus made wine. And your conscience is weak. There are people who think one day is holier than all the others, and Paul says their consciences are weak. Now, that's kind of hard, right? Because when your conscience is weak, you feel like it's pretty strong. Right? I've got a few of those issues myself. I've got a pretty good unbiblical case for what I believe. Nonetheless, Paul identifies certain consciences that have not walked into the fullness of God's revelation. He identifies them as weak. You're going to have a weak conscience. And conversely, you can have a strong conscience. A strong conscience is one that fully walks in what God has revealed to be okay.

A conscience can also be seared. 1 Timothy 4:1 please. A conscience can also be seared. 1 Timothy 4:1 Remember we're now in the same book that our first passage comes from. Paul says, "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times, some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and the teachings of demons through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage, and require abstinence from food that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the Word of God and prayer."

Now some of you could come up to me after the service, and if my experience is true, some of you will, and you've got burns. Places where your skin has been seared. And of course,

you know, if you put out a match with your two fingers, it's no big deal, but if you fall onto the top of the stove or you wind up in a fire, you wind up with skin where the nerve damage is terrible, where you can no longer feel what's going on on the skin. And so what ought to be sensitive and sensitive to touch, you actually can't feel because it's seared. And the Bible says that the conscience can become like that. You know, one time, you say your first cuss word. Then years later, you're swearing like a sailor and you don't even notice. A person looks at their first pornographic image, and it's seared into their minds. It's blazed in there. And then, ten years later, they can't even remember how much garbage they've seen. The first time, it just bothered them, it tormented them. Ten years later, they didn't even realize it was wrong. That's a seared conscience. It's not sensitive the way it ought to be.

And we tend to think about that with drugs and alcohol. If you get into drugs and alcohol, you'll sear your conscience, and you really will. But Paul's concern is actually with legalism. There's some people that say marriage is bad, and I'm here to tell you they're demonic. Isn't that what the verse says? "By devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and the teaching of demons." Some people forbid marriage. Some people make new rules and regulations where you've got to be just about like Jesus before you're allowed to marry anybody. They make it almost impossible for anyone to get married. You can court my daughter once you're perfect. That sounds godly. Sounds a lot like 1 Corinthians 7. If you're struggling, let them get married. Some people don't realize that tacos are a gift from God. Amen? If you don't agree, well, go back to that demonic verse. And we need to watch those things because it can feel very holy not to do certain things. When you get a zeal for the Lord, it's very easy for Satan to hijack that with a do not taste, do not handle, do not touch mentality. I used to do those things, but now I don't. Well, if what you mean is you used to be an adulterer, but now you're not? Good. But if you mean you used to enjoy food, but now you don't? Bad. Your conscience is being seared.

Another aspect or state of the conscience can be in is guilty, or in the words of Hebrews in the ESV, "evil." Hebrews 10:22. Hebrews 10:22. Here the writer of Hebrews writes in Hebrews 10:22, "Let us draw near..." meaning, draw near to God. "...With a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience..." Or as some translations put it: "from a guilty conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water." Isn't this interesting? When we draw near to God, the conscience comes up, doesn't it? Because as soon as you go to draw near to God, ooh, that thing you said to your wife pops up. The fact that you weren't just biblically correcting your children, but you were screaming comes up.

Years ago, I was preaching, and I hadn't planned on mentioning it, I just mentioned, maybe some of you have cheated on your taxes, and immediately, a lady comes up to me after the service and said, "I've never cheated on my taxes before. I cheated on them this year." It's amazing how things can just surface when we go to approach God. And if we're going to approach God and really enjoy it and actually commune with God, the guilt or the evil that's on our consciences needs to be cleansed. It needs to be washed away. Because otherwise, you know you're approaching a holy God as a dirty sinner. And that's simply not possible, because His eyes are too pure to behold what's sinful. So there's a guilty or evil conscience.

And then, let's remember this one really quickly. There is such a thing as a purified conscience. A cleansed conscience. Hebrews 9:11-14. We'll look at v. 14. Hebrews 9, "How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without

blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works... (works that call out for your death) to serve the living God." The apostle here is talking to us about how in the Old Testament, worship of God and the approach to God was when you approached His temple and approached His tabernacle, and this was done by sacrificing animals year after year after year. And we're told that the sacrificing of animals never took away the knowledge of sin. But how much more the blood of Christ, who was the Sheep without a blemish; who wasn't just one lamb, but was the Lamb of God. Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. It says here, "How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God." Listen to me. Your conscience screams out for your death. Your conscience gnaws away at you for your death. Your conscience screams like the blood of guilt and says, "you deserve to die for that thing you did and for those things you did and for those attitudes you harbor. You deserve to die."

And then Christ comes shedding His own blood and says, "I died." Your conscience screams for the wrath of God to be poured out on you. And Christ stands before you and takes the wrath of God; propitiating the wrath of God; taking all the wrath of God on Himself. The way to deal with the conscience is not to say, "Oh, everybody does it." "Oh, it's not that bad." "Oh, I'll forget about it eventually." Beloved, some of you will find that the conscience comes to haunt you in your last minute before you die. Those secrets will not go away. They must be dealt with by the blood of Christ. You feel dirty? He is clean. You feel defiled? He is pure. You feel like your conscience rages and calls out for the wrath of God? He has satisfied the wrath of God by taking upon Himself in His body on the tree. Beloved, you can be clean. I don't care if you killed your children, or if you drove your girlfriend to the abortion clinic, or if you've shot someone that you've never told anyone about, or if there's a harem in your mind from all the pornography you've looked at, or if you told a lie to your mother or your father, or you stole from your children, or you stole from your parents, or you stole from your boss - whatever it is, if you will lay it before Jesus, He will cleanse it. And He will take away even the consciousness of guilt. He will cleanse your conscience. A cleansed conscience is not a conscience that managed to forget guilt. It's a conscience that has experienced guilt dealt with by the price being fully paid at the cross. Oh, in the sea of God's forgetfulness. That's good enough for me. Praise God, my sins are gone!

And then a conscience - 1 Timothy 1:5 - can be good. What's a good conscience? A good conscience is a conscience that is purified and is learning God's path. The good conscience is a conscience that is purified and is learning God's path. Think about the rest of the book of 1 Timothy. It unfolds how we ought to behave as people of the church. It teaches us how a person ought to behave when they are part of the household of God. And the way they ought to behave is explained and it's conscience-liberating to read the Word of God to realize what God expects of you. There are some pastors who feel terribly guilty because they're caring for their wives, caring for their children; they feel like they should be out every night. They need to go, go, go, go, go because people are dying and going to hell. And then the Bible comes along to their conscience and says no, you need to manage your own household well. Because if you can't manage your own household well, how will you manage God's church? And there's moms who think, I should be counseling; I should be evangelizing. but instead I'm just caring for

these kids and caring for this husband. Kids and husband. Kids and husband. All the time. All the time. All the time. And then 1 Timothy comes along in 1 Timothy 2 and says, you'll be saved through childbearing. "...If you continue in faith and love and holiness with self-control." That doesn't mean you have a baby, you go to heaven. It means the ordinary context in which a woman who's married will work out her salvation with fear and trembling will be in the task of mothering. Are you preoccupied with mothering? Well, if you're a mother, praise God! Let the truth of God's Word inform your conscience so that it's good. You know how many places it says in the Bible that if you have a pile of laundry in the basement, you're in sin? Nowhere. And if you let it bind your conscience, it will ruin you. W

e're laughing, but there are depressed, demoralized, discouraged women who are binding their consciences with the things the Word of God says nothing about. You've got a friend, and they're selling vitamins, and if you buy these vitamins, you'll be broke but your kids will live forever. What kind of a mother am I buying Happy Meals? Well, you're a good mother. There's good toys in the Happy Meals. We don't dare bind ourselves. It's no small issue. Calvin said people think that we reformers are making a big deal by speaking about holy days and vestments and saying that they have no place in the church. He said we are right on target because as soon as the conscience binds itself with things that are beyond the Word of God, it produces no end of misery. He says that first, a person will say I can't drink wine. And then, they'll think, I can't drink sparkling water. And then they won't be able to find a water that's clean enough. That's what your conscience will do if it's not gripped by the Word of God and the Word of God alone.

I remember as a young pastor, I was pastoring all these young people. I'm still pastoring all these young people. And I was really young. I'm still pretty young, but I was even younger. And they were even younger. So we were just the blind leading the blind. And I thought I need to preach on marriage and the family, and I need to give them all kinds of instructions on how dad's need to take their kids deer hunting to make them real men and eat steak with them. And moms need to do this and that. I need to give them all these incredible, great family values to protect them from the ungodliness of the world. And then you read your Bible, and? None of it's there! Paul's writing to pagans converted to Christianity in Colossians. And he's going to teach them how to do marriage. Husbands, love your wives. Next verse. What about the date night? What about the full financial plan? What about putting a maximum security prison around your daughter until she's 25? Who forgot that part?

Listen to me. Believing in the sufficiency of Scripture - that's the doctrine that Scripture is enough to lead us into all godliness - believing in the sufficiency of Scripture not only means that you say all that Scripture says, but that you don't say what the Scripture doesn't say. Because if God shuts His mouth, He knows what He's doing. And what happens when you pare down godliness to those basic things, is you get a gospel that can take the planet by storm, instead of getting caught up in your cultural baggage. You wind up with a gospel that can go to every single part of the planet not wrapped in American clothes or Victorian English clothes, but wrapped in the clothes of Christ, bringing people to the essence of godliness. Love your wife. How do you do it? Well, we do a date night. Oh yeah? We don't. But I love her too. Which one of us is godlier? That's not the point. A good conscience is one that is led by the Word of God alone! And it's not a little holier to add to it. It's demonic. And it wrecks people's souls, and it

eats their consciences up, and it steals their joy from loving the pure sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's not a joke. We've got people who are so serious about not being worldly in the drugs and alcohol way, but who love to flirt with worldliness in the legalism way. Deadly!

Now, what I want to do with the time we have remaining - and I'm planning to have quite a bit of time remaining, just in case you're curious - what I want to do in the time remaining is I want to discuss the relationship (incomplete thought) - three different relationships your conscience is in. The relationship between your conscience and the devil. The relationship between your conscience and the world. And then your relationship between the conscience and the church. First, your conscience and the devil. You can turn to Colossians 2. Relationship between your conscience and the devil. It all sounds so easy when I say it, right? A good conscience is one that's purified and follows God's path. Go. A good conscience is one that's purified and follows God's path, but we have an enemy who's called the accuser of the brethren. And he loves to accuse our consciences. He likes to throw fiery darts at them. He likes to hail us with accusations. He likes to assault us by reminding us of the condemnation of God's law, and then he'll even condemn us with laws that go beyond God's law. And you need to know how to deal with the devil. Because you can lay hold of Christ, and you can try to follow God's path, and the devil will be there pelting you with accusations. You didn't do that one perfectly enough. Have you ever thought about it - the devil doesn't have a conscience holding him back. He doesn't have a heart holding him back. Even the wickedest human being has some semblance of good left in them. There is no good in the devil. He is all evil. And he wants us all dead and destroyed. He will accuse you until your joy is gone. And if he can, he'll have you leave Jesus. And you need to know what to do when he comes to you with accusations. And I would suggest one thing to do is to remember Colossians 2:13-15.

Paul talking to Christians says, "You were dead in your trespasses and sins in the uncircumcision of your flesh." You were dead - walking in the way of sin, following the way of the devil, Ephesians 2 says. Unresponsive to God. "And God made you alive together with Him..." Together with Christ. "...Having forgiven all of our trespasses by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross." So the law says to you, "you owe God perfect obedience and if you're not perfectly obedient, you deserve to die. You owe God your life. You deserve to die." But Christ came and died for believers. He came and took the curse of the law, says Galatians 3, on Himself, so that the death penalty that you and I deserve was poured out on Christ, so that that death penalty is no longer there to be had because it's been, as our brother said yesterday, paid in full. Now what the devil will do is he will put a gun to your head, and he will say, "you are guilty and you will be condemned. You are guilty and you will be condemned. You have not loved God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you have not loved your neighbor as yourself, and you are going to be condemned." And when the devil does that with his gun to your head, you say, "There's no bullets in the gun, devil." "This He set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed (that is, God disarmed) the rulers and authorities (that's the satanic powers - the principalities and the powers of this world) - He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to an open shame by triumphing over them in Him." The devil comes and tells you you're condemned; your sins can't be forgiven, you've got that one sin; or your sanctification hasn't been fast enough, and he puts you under God's law, and he tells you you're condemned, and he

will roar and he will rage and he will do everything to convince you that he has all the power to condemn you, and you need to remind him, he is disarmed. Because what's he threatening you with? The condemnation of the law? Well, if Jesus did anything, He took the condemnation of the law away. "God made Jesus who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." "There's no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." And the devil has only empty threats. You remember that when he comes to rage at you. You hold on to that, and he will flee.

The other thing you need to remember when you're dealing with the devil is that he always wants you in front of the law, not in front of the Father. The devil always wants you in front of the law, not in front of the Father. The law says you've got to do everything I've commanded, or you're dead. The Father says I had everything done for me in Christ, and you're Mine. The law accepts only perfect obedience or you're dead. The Father has received perfect obedience through Christ and now delights in your growing imperfect obedience. The law expects perfection and executes perfect righteousness. The gospel says perfect righteousness has been satisfied and now delights to see the flower of the new birth growing in your soul.

You say, where's that in the Bible? Well, there's one example in John 17:6. John 17:6. Here's Jesus praying for Peter, and James, and John, and all those disciples who would fight about who was the greatest. And who would stumble in their discipleship. And Jesus prays in John 17:6. Now remember, He's praying to God. He's not putting on a show for man. He's praying to God. He says, "I have manifested Your name to the people whom You gave Me out of the world." I showed Your people You. I have manifested Your name - Your character - to the people You gave Me out of the world. "Yours they were, and You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your Word." Do you know who He's talking about? Have you read the Gospels? Peter, James, John... the other ones. "I want to be on His right hand." "Go tell mom to argue that I should be on His right hand." These guys. "They have kept Your Word." Now Jesus isn't saying they were perfect. But He's saying that the direction of their life was pleasing. And He was assessing their life like a father assesses his own child.

Have you ever seen a 5 year old clean their room? It's fairly pathetic. But if you walk into that room and see that the covers were basically moved in the direction, and the toys weren't all just hidden under the bed, if you're a halfway decent father, you celebrate right then and there. You did what I said. And the Lord loves to delight in the imperfect obedience of His children. Oh, He will discipline His children when they're disobedient, but there's only imperfect obedience, and He delights in it. And you need to know that the devil will never let you see that. But Christ will keep that before your eyes. Without that, you'll have no freedom in your conscience.

Second one, real quick. Your conscience's relationship to the world. 2 Corinthians 4:1. Our brother gave such a good definition of natural Christianity; being a normal person; hanging out with your unbelieving friends and relatives in a normal way. Kevin did such a great job of that. What's your job once you're washing the dishes with them? Maybe even occasionally singing the secular song that's in the background while you're doing it? But not if it's a bad one. What's your job then? 2 Corinthians 4:1. "Thereby having this ministry by the mercy of God we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's Word..." We're not slick and fancy in our ministry. "But by the open statement of the truth, we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in

the sight of God." That's all we're called to do. Openly state the truth and place it on people's consciences. But when I say that we're sinners, they don't listen. When I say Christ died for sins, they don't listen. No, they just haven't repented and believed yet. They heard you. That seed's been sown. It's laying on the conscience. It can do its work when the head goes on the pillow. And God will redeem all of His own who hear the Gospel. You lay it on their conscience in gentleness and love. If they hate you or love you, you simply make an open statement of the truth and lay it on men's consciences in the sight of God. You don't need to be fancy. You don't need to get a blimp and get the gospel up in the air. You don't need to do anything like that. You just need to talk to people honestly about sin and salvation, laying it on their consciences and God will do His work. You know, oftentimes people think, well, I can't share the gospel. These people don't even believe in God. They don't understand the Bible. They don't really believe any of the same things I do about right and wrong. We have missionaries now in our day who don't think they can just go to other countries and share the gospel. They have to do like six months of ethnographic research before they can even share the gospel. Listen, there isn't a place on the planet where people don't have consciences. It's part of the image of God. You have an ally in evangelism everywhere you go. And the minute the Spirit wants to make that conscience alive and awake, He will do it. You just ask Him that you would speak the open statement of the truth and commend yourself to every man's conscience in the sight of God. What a liberating look at evangelism!

Lastly, and by lastly, I don't mean briefly. So turn to Romans 14. Romans 14. This issue of the conscience is so critical in our relationships in the local church. All of the members of local churches have consciences. And when they're members of churches like ours, they have enlightened consciences. And when they're members of churches like ours, they have convictional consciences that believe things strongly. And that's good. But you've got to know how to handle it. You've got to know how to handle it. It's good to have 50 people or 100 people or 1,000 people who are fully convinced in their own mind that they are doing the will of God in every detail of their lives. That's good. I'm not saying anything to lessen that. We need more of that, not less of it. But you need to know how to handle it. Or it will destroy the unity and the love of the church, and if you destroy the unity and the love of the church, you destroy the witness of the church.

Let me read to you Romans 14:1. We'll bring out a few things, and then we'll be done. "As for the one who is weak in faith..." That's another way of saying has a weak conscience. "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions." My brother used to have a "Whole Foods" bumper sticker. You know Whole Foods grocery stores? Everything in there is awesome. We call it "Whole Paycheck" at our church. And that bumper sticker said, "Friends don't let friends eat junk." And I cleared it with him before I preached on this. But I said according to Romans 14:1, sometimes friends do let friends eat junk. "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions." Secondary, tertiary matters that are so far from the center of the gospel. Do you use nutberries in your bread? I had a guy show up on my doorstep one time - one of our members - and he said to me, "You know, Ryan, I've just been learning so much about the biblical diet lately." And I just said, "No, you haven't." "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he can eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables." No, I

don't mean to harp on this, but do notice that the weak person is the more restrictive person. It's humbling. "Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains. And let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats. For God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand." Even if he listens to Christian hip-hop, he can stand? Yes, even him. He can be made to stand. What if he only listens to the Gaithers? Yes, he can stand too. God can keep him standing. I know it's hard to believe.

You get these differences in the church, right? One guy's like, "I would never get a tattoo." Another guy's like, "Revelation 7's right here." You're like, how is this guy going to stand? His Master is going to make him stand. That's how it's going to happen. His Master has a personal interest in him. And He's going to make him stand. "He will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." We're not diminishing convictional Christianity. We're learning how to deal with it. If you will never get a tattoo, you should be fully convinced in your own mind. If you're going to get a tattoo, you better not get one because everyone else got one. You should be fully convinced in your own mind or you ought not to touch that thing. "The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The ones who eats, eats in honor of the Lord since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So whether or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end, Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and the living."

Three principles and I think we're done. Your primary responsibility towards people who differ with you on secondary matters is to have them over for dinner and make it a welcoming, warm experience. "As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions." If all the people who ever get into your house homeschool just like you homeschool, you're doing something wrong. If you only let your kids play with the other public school kids, you're doing something wrong. If two Christians can't differ on schooling methods, we've got a problem. If you only invite people who eat your special diet, you've got a problem. And maybe you ought to be willing, if it's not a convictional issue, to not eat your diet, to be able to get over and show hospitality in someone's home. And when you get together, the point isn't: here's the roast beef. There are some issues I've been wanting to talk to you about in the Lord, brother. Just let it go. Just let it go. Now, that doesn't mean there can't be those conversations among the body, but let there first be a warm environment of hospitality and love where it's abundantly clear that I view you as a fellow servant of Christ. Now, I'm going to talk to people who watch movies I wouldn't watch, and I'm going to have a conversation with them. Sure I am. If I'm worried about something, I'm going to talk to someone about it. But first, first is not the quarreling over opinions. First is the warm relationship of welcome and love.

Second, you need to realize that the weak and the strong both have unique temptations. The weak and the strong both have their unique set of temptations. You notice that? "One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains. Let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats." Despising and judgment. Okay, strong people are tempted to despise. Weak

people are tempted to judge. And this was so clear years ago when everything on the blogs was about who could drink beer and who couldn't. The people who could drink beer despised - "how do you even live without tasting a craft beer?" "How do you even be a Christian?" "How do you enjoy life to the full, you fundamentalist fools?" And then on the other side, nothing but judgment. Worldly. Backslidden. Heathen. Both are displeasing sins to Jesus. Both of them. They are both wrong. It's wrong to judge someone in a way that condemns them, when they're different than you on a secondary matter. And it's wrong to despise someone who doesn't have the same freedom as you. It's wrong because the goal of our instruction is love. Love. It's always love. We're always after love. But Ryan, how do I love when I feel the person's compromising? I mean, I'm really, I'm trying to be faithful, and I really believe that I should only listen to Christian music. I believe it. I'm not trying to be a legalist. I love Jesus. And that's just where I'm at. And that's where a lot of you are at, and praise God for you, for just trying to live before the Lord in everything.

And others of you are like, Ryan, I really believe I have the liberty to do this, and I'm not trying to sin. I'm not trying to get away with anything. I want to be holy in everything I do. Praise God for you. How do those people get along without feeling like they're compromising? Because that's what you're afraid of right? You're afraid if you welcome this person in, you're going to compromise your walk with Jesus. How do you do it? You learn to recognize something deeper than the superficial stuff. You learn to recognize a heart that wants to honor the Lord, even though they're not honoring the Lord exactly the way you would. You see that in the text? It says there, "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?" We're in v. 4. "It is because of his own master that he stands or falls, and he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day (listen here) observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord, and gives thanks to God." When we put all the focus on these secondary matters, all we notice is: you watch movies I wouldn't watch. And we miss a heart to honor the Lord. Come on, are there too many hearts in the world that want to honor the Lord that you want to miss even one of them? What we want to learn is how to detect a heart that wants to honor the Lord and is thanking the Lord.

Now, you may not be able to do what they do. And don't do what they do, if you're not convinced in your own mind. But notice a heart that wants to honor the Lord, and when you notice that, you have the most important bond in the world. And God's going to uphold people who try to honor Him. Even if they don't get it exactly right in every detail. Let me give you an example of this. In the church I pastor, if I knew a guy was looking at pornography, was messing around sexually, and was watching movies - they weren't pornographic, but they were just risque, I would get right into his face and say you are so compromised. You are just flirting with all kinds of temptation and you need to get out of that. You need to cut off your hand and gouge out your eye. End of story. That's absolutely what you need to do. In the words of Titus, I insist on these things. I will not let you ignore me. And then I've got another guy in the church who teaches the Bible, loves the Bible, visits widows, cares for his wife, seeks to honor the Lord, and there's a few movies he watches that I wouldn't watch. I'll be honest. I don't like that. I don't like

it. I want everyone to draw their movie lines right where I draw them. I do. I'm fully convinced in my own mind. And I'm going to have a warm lunch with that guy. I'm going to commend all the godliness within him, and then, we may get around to talking about, hey, what are these different convictions? Because this is looking like it would be bad for me. For me, that would be sin. How do you do that? But the way you're handling that is so different, than just going on a tirade against everyone who is not holding the exact same convictions as you.

So beloved, I leave you with this. The goal of every sermon you ever hear is love. Caring for people. Having a warm regard for them. And it needs to come from a good conscience. You get one of those by plunging your dead, evil conscience under the blood of Jesus that purifies you from all unrighteousness. And then you begin to walk in His path. And as you walk in His path, you will face many people who aren't quite figuring out His path exactly the way you are. And our job there is to discern an honor for the Lord, and a thankfulness for the Lord. And to just shower those people with love. When that kind of love relationship exists, you will have the best kind of context to actually have the good discussions to refine our consciences with and to think about following Him more closely and walking in love before Him together. Oh, may God make us as free as the gospel wants us to be, and just enjoy Jesus as much as the gospel wants us to enjoy Jesus.

Father, thank You so much for Your grace. Lord, I have probably revealed some convictions of my own in the course of this sermon that would tempt some to despise me. I pray that You would just keep us from despising. I'm probably sure I'll meet some folks who hold convictions that I think are weaker than my own. I pray that I would not judge them or despise them. Lord, fill us with love. Lord, we pray that this teaching would not be used to justify anything that is clearly wicked or sinful. Lord, Christian liberty is meant to help us walk in love and holiness; not sin and degradation. Lord, we pray that You'd use this teaching to free us from all the extra-biblical expectations we heap on ourselves that destroy our joy. Lord, we pray this in Jesus' mighty name. Amen.