



"Conscience"...*the voice from within* - 1 John 3:20-24

by Pastor Tim Dodson at Jesus Fellowship of Believers
in Menomonie, Wisconsin - March 29th, 2015

1 John 3:20 -24 (20) *For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things. (21) Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. (22) And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. (23) And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment. (24) Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.*

John...the “apostle of love,” has driven home this issue of the importance of love, both horizontal as well as vertical. One might say John was even obsessing somewhat in this letter. But John saw that love was not only the central tenant of our faith manifest, but also the supreme litmus test of our faith standing. This is where our Christianity begins and ends! Thus grasping both the practice and the full understanding of just what this ‘agape’ love looks like, and acts like, has eternal ramifications.

In verse 20 of chapter 3, John seems to pause to take a breath. In doing so, he seems to be taking a moment to ask the reader what they think about what he had been saying for 3 chapters...how his words and teaching struck them. Were they therein confident and assured in their standing with Christ, or was their heart now troubled? With so much riding on this business with Jesus, one would think that conventional wisdom would drive us to careful and regular personal review. And yet, seldom are we so willing, and frankly we most often prefer to live in blissful ignorance...or at least we attempt to do so. But we must realize that God does not. And no matter if we can dance through life avoiding all introspection and self awareness, that meeting with the master will take place right on schedule without excuse.

2 Cor. 5:10 *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.*

Rom. 14:10 *... we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.*

Matt. 12:36 *“...every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment.”*

For the unredeemed, this should be cause for fear. And John has given us **all** enough reasons in this letter to step back and evaluate our faith standing! Thus, such a day of reckoning should in fact cause **all** of us to be greatly motivated to review and appraise our spiritual condition! If God's love is being perfected in us, we will have a confidence and peace that only God can bring us. If we are not in that place of faithful standing, then our hearts will be troubled and unrest will rule our lives.

Once again I am compelled at this point in this subject to remind everyone that we cannot earn our standing in heaven. We are not called to perform at some level in order to gain enough points to ‘buy boardwalk’ and live in heaven. To chase that ‘monopoly’ analogy, we would instead see it as Jesus gave us a free “get-out-of-jail-free” card! Jesus opened the floodgates...he did all the miraculous...He squared things in heaven for all of

humanity, but folks, *we still have to swim*. Jesus brought all the water, but will we drown in that grace because we rejected human participation? Because grace has the effect of washing us white as snow, or instead exposing our rejection of such a pronouncement. Grace is a powerful thing! 1John 4:18 *There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.*

John has already told us that it is the presence and the legitimate exercise of ‘Christ love’ that confirms that we are ‘of the truth.’ It is that same evidence that condemns us or exonerates us. Not in that I ‘sucked it up and did my duty to love’ but rather I was strangely and wonderfully compelled...often outside or beyond my natural tendencies, to love supernaturally both my Creator, and my brethren, thus proving that God is with me and in me.

Sometimes there are those of us that need that litmus test to confirm that we are not what we would like to believe we are and we need to even yet truly surrender our lives to Christ. And then others of us need that same test to settle our hearts and chase off the false accusations of the devil that is relentlessly pounding away at our confidence in Christ and ultimately in our own salvation status.

This is a difficult thing to discern. How can I tell if the Holy Spirit has been convicting me, or if I’m just condemning myself? One way is to see the direction and the method in which you are being affected. If you are being *led* back to the Lord, it’s the Holy Spirit. If it’s driving you *away* from the Lord, it’s either yourself or the devil.

Sometimes our heart is wrong in condemning us. The heart can be a pretty wicked thing –Jeremiah 17:9 says *"The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?"* So contrary to the world’s mantra, we should *not* “trust ourselves!” We are constantly being barraged with the same message...telling us to “believe in ourselves,” and that we really can only in the end count on ourselves, not to mention *trust* ourselves. I’m always flabbergasted at that... *“seriously? Trust myself? Even after all the hurt and lies and disasters that have been meted out with these hands and this heart? You must be kidding...”*

Because the fact is, no one has done you more harm, lied to you more, and misled you more often than *you!* Seems to me that you might actually be the *last* person you should trust...certainly without a second opinion from someone who loves you enough to be starkly honest with you! I could let my conscience be my guide but then I might turn out to be a sociopath!

Sometimes however, a person who is troubled with doubts and self-condemnation must take himself in hand and confront himself with what he knows to be true about God’s work in his life and what is true of God’s greater knowledge of his heart. He or she must seek the evidence...the ‘fruit’ of salvation that God says will come from a redeemed spirit-led life. Galatians 5:22-23 tells us, *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”* The fruit of the Holy Spirit is the result of the Holy Spirit’s presence in the life of a Christian. The Bible makes it clear that everyone receives the Holy Spirit the moment he or she believes in Jesus Christ (Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 1:13-14).

One of the primary purposes of the Holy Spirit coming into a Christian's life is to ***change that life***. It is the Holy Spirit's job to conform us to the image of Christ, making us more like Him. That does not mean we will...even in the redeemed state, ever master such spiritual manifests. No, we will often fall short of perfection of such. But ***are those spiritual manifests present? In a greater degree than prior to salvation? In a greater degree than previously in my walk? Am I growing stronger and more fruitful as I move through this life?***

Galatians also paints a vivid picture of the flip side...what we can expect when we are *not* in right standing with God? Galatians 5:19-21, "*The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*" Now, it would be dangerous to pick and choose here...saying, well...that's not me...I'm not involved in orgies and witchcraft! My conscience is clear! But what about jealousy...fits of anger...selfish ambition...dissensions? These are also "acts of the sinful nature." Signs that the "old man" is ***not*** dead...but in fact is alive and well!

And when we do fail, what is our reaction to such? ***Do we feel bad?*** Plenty of people react *that* way even when they are clearly not of the family of God! This is the place that repentance and grace play out in our lives. Falling in such a way does not disqualify us from redemption standing. But does such drive us to the feet of Jesus? Do we seek Him out, seek forgiveness and restoration? How about from the individual we sinned against? Or do we justify ourselves and defend our actions and move a little further away from God and His church?

Our "conscience" speaks of our self-awareness in the greater world. One cannot emphatically separate one's *feelings* or one's *emotions* from such, but those issues are fickle and susceptible to all sorts of stimulus that distort the facts. What we must be very concerned about is *truth*. And truth is based on evidence and facts. It is more than an autonomous view between a person and his or her world. Our conscious is also part of a larger relationship between us and God, and ourselves and the covenant community in which we participate.

This of course only strengthens the need for community and fellowship, for without such we ultimately become our own judge and jury. In 1 Corinthians 4:4 Paul reflects upon his ministry and motives and "knows nothing against himself" (sunoida; translated "My conscience is clear" by the NIV), but he affirms that he is still subject to critique by God. Here Paul illustrates that conscience is not an end in itself, but is subject to review.

Conscience in scripture is consistently presented as a "witness" to something (cf. [Rom 2:15](#) ; [9:1](#) ; [2 Cor 1:12](#) ; [4:2](#) ; [5:11](#)), along with the implications of adjectives such as a "good," or "clear" conscience . Conscience is not to be an independent authority. Conscience is not to be the judge in the sense of rendering a verdict. A witness does not create evidence, nor does it render judgment, but it is bound to testify to evidence that exists.

The conscience is not to dictate the content of right or wrong; it merely witnesses to what the value system in a person has determined is right or wrong. In this regard, conscience is not a guide but needs to be guided by a thoroughly and critically developed value system. Our conscience reflects our worldview, but what determines that worldview? Unless it is God and scripture, then such is dictated by fluid morality or fickle feelings and emotions.

This is why we are compelled to read, to learn, to pray, to listen, to seek the authority of scripture and the counsel of our brethren. To grow and then grow some more. If our worldview is overtly excusing, then so is our

conscience. If it is particularly legalistic and rigid, then again, so is our conscience. If our worldview is accurately based on God's words, His character and His instruction, then our conscience is a useful and fairly accurate tool in our walk of faith. If it is not, then that very same conscience can take us on a crazy journey to distant places.

As a person's worldview is informed and changed, conscience will follow. Thus when a person's judgment is wrong in light of a biblically enlightened worldview, he or she should be given correct information and the opportunity to pursue maturity without oppressive external manipulation. This is the way of love (cf. 1 Cor 8:1-3). The community endures the weaknesses of the spiritually young until they have had the opportunity to learn the correct way and it becomes a new conviction for them. If they refuse to learn and mature, then they have shifted from the category of weak to belligerent and thereby come under new rules of engagement. Being that it is the parents' responsibility to see that their children have the teaching and the surroundings in which to develop a mature divine conscience, I am constantly amazed when they attempt to give a "we just trust our child's decisions and they are very mature so..." *Seriously?*

The fact is, many of us are beaten up by our conscience's on a regular basis when we have no cause, and others are seemingly free from any 'inner voice' speaking against their lifestyle when they are factually still given over to the flesh. Verse 24 tells us "*he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him.*" Not, "he who feels bad is still lost and he who isn't bothered by his conscience is a saint." What do the facts say? Conscience can never be the 'supreme court.' Is God's love present and in action in your life? Even inexplicably so? If this is not John's point and is not his instruction herein, then why the very specific, detailed, and emphatic oration on the necessity of love's manifest in and through our lives for 3 chapters?

Verse 24 finishes up by saying "by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us." Not our conscience, but by the Spirit that He has given to walk this path with us. That Spirit communicates through the Word of God, the scripture and scriptural teaching, through grace and forgiveness, through discipline and correction, the fellowship of community, and yes, our conscience when it is developed and based on God's truth...on the facts of what is genuine.

We must always ask the voice on the other end of the line "who is calling please?"