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The Question of Conscience

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

When Martin Luther stood before the Diet of Worms and was asked to recant, he declared before the watching world, “I cannot recant. My conscience is held captive by the Word of God. And to act against conscience is neither right nor safe.” Understanding the role of the conscience and its relation to the law of God is extremely important, and in this lecture, Dr. Sproul sets forth several principles to clarify the manner in which the conscience should function in the life of the Christian.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To be able to explain the difference between the classical and the relativistic views of the conscience.
2. To be able to outline the basic principles of the biblical view of the conscience.

QUOTATIONS

Now, since believers’ consciences having received the privilege of their freedom . . . have, by Christ’s gift, attained to this, that they should not be entangled with any snares of observances in those matters in which the Lord has willed them to be free, we conclude that they are released from the power of all men. For Christ does not deserve to forfeit our gratitude for his great generosity—nor consciences, their profit. And we should not put a light value upon something that we see cost Christ so dear, since he valued it not with gold or silver but with his own blood [1 Peter 1:18–19].

— John Calvin

A good conscience, then, is nothing but inward integrity of heart. In this sense, Paul writes that the fulfillment of the law is love from a clear conscience and sincere faith [cf. 1 Tim. 1:5].

— John Calvin

LECTURE OUTLINE

I. The Classical View of the Conscience

- A. In the classical view, the conscience was thought to be something that was implanted within our minds by God Himself.
- B. Some even described the conscience as the voice of God within.
- C. There was an idea that God had somehow created man in such a way that there was a consciousness of our built-in responsibility to observe God's law.
- D. Scripture does teach that an ethical sense is built into the human race.
- E. Immanuel Kant offered a moral argument for the existence of God based on his study of what he called a universal sense of "oughtness" implanted in the heart of every human being.
- F. Kant referred to this sense of "oughtness" as the categorical imperative.
- G. Even in the realm of secular philosophy, there has been an awareness of a built-in mechanism of the mind that we call the conscience.

II. The Relativistic View of the Conscience

- A. With the moral revolution of our culture, a different approach to conscience has emerged—a relativistic view.
- B. According to relativists, values and principles are simply expressions of the desires and interests of a given group of people at a given time in history, but there are no absolutes.
- C. Within a relativistic framework, conscience is defined as a result of evolutionary processes, in which people's subjective inner personalities react to taboos imposed on them by their society.

III. The Biblical View of the Conscience

- A. The word "conscience" is seldom used in the Old Testament, but it is found thirty-one times in the New Testament.
- B. In the New Testament, the conscience seems to have a twofold dimension to it—the ideas of accusing and of excusing.
- C. The conscience is the tool used by the Holy Spirit to bring us under conviction and to drive us to repentance.
- D. There is also a sense in which the conscience can tell us what is right when we are the targets of invalid criticisms.
- E. In the New Testament, the conscience is not the final ethical authority for human conduct because the conscience is capable of change, whereas God's principles do not change.
- F. The conscience can undergo change in both directions.
- G. The conscience can be seared and calloused through repeated sin.
- H. The conscience can also be sensitized in a distorted way by misinformation.

IV. Acting Against Conscience

- A. Acting against conscience is sin.
- B. As Martin Luther declared before the Diet of Worms, “To act against conscience is neither right nor safe.”
- C. The New Testament teaches this principle when it says that “Whatever is not from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).
- D. Even if we are misinformed, if we do something that we think is sin, we are guilty of sin.

V. Acting According to Conscience

- A. It is possible to act according to conscience and still be guilty of committing sin because the conscience can be misinformed.
- B. There are certain things that we cannot know in this world, but the law of God is not one of them.
- C. God has been pleased to reveal His principles to us, and He requires that each Christian master those principles in order that his or her conscience may be informed.
- D. Christians are called to have the mind of Christ, to have our hearts and our minds trained by God’s truth, so that when the moment of pressure comes, we will be able to stand with integrity.
- E. Christians are not to allow their consciences to be shaped and formed by ungodly advice.
- F. Instead, Christians are to meditate on the Word of God day and night.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In the _____ view, the conscience is thought to be something that was implanted within our minds by God Himself.
 - a. Classical
 - b. Positive
 - c. Relativistic
 - d. Pagan
2. _____ offered a moral argument for the existence of God based on his study of what he called a universal sense of “oughtness” implanted in the heart of every human being.
 - a. Søren Kierkegaard
 - b. René Descartes
 - c. Immanuel Kant
 - d. David Hume

3. Within a _____ framework, conscience is defined as a result of evolutionary processes, in which people's subjective inner personalities react to taboos imposed on them by their society.
 - a. Classical
 - b. New Testament
 - c. Relativistic
 - d. Old Testament

4. Acting against conscience is _____.
 - a. Not sin
 - b. Sin
 - c. Seldom sin
 - d. Usually sin

BIBLE STUDY

1. How is the conscience usually described in the Old Testament? Read the following passages to help answer this question.
 - a. 2 Samuel 24:10
 - b. Job 27:6
 - c. Psalm 32:1–5
 - d. Psalm 51:1–9

2. How does Romans 14:23 support the idea that acting against conscience is sin?

3. What does the blood of Christ do for the believer's conscience, according to Hebrews 9:14 and 10:22?

4. Read 1 Corinthians 8:1–13. In this passage, Paul is addressing a specific cultural issue that most modern Christians will never encounter. What are some of the general principles found in this text that can be applied to any number of situations? What additional principles are outlined in 1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain the difference between the classical and the relativistic views of the conscience.

2. Outline the basic principles of the biblical view of the conscience.

3. Using the principles learned in this lesson and in your study of Scripture, how would you counsel and teach a young believer coming to your church who was struggling over the question whether it was right to eat certain foods or drink certain drinks? How would you counsel someone who was unwilling to give up certain liberties for any amount of time in order to prevent a weaker brother from being wounded? Do churches today do a good job of balancing Christian liberty with the needs of the weaker brethren? If not, how could the balance be better achieved?

APPLICATION

1. Do you have a good conscience, purified by the blood of Christ? Or is your conscience distorted in one direction or the other? Has your conscience been oversensitized to things that are not sin by misinformation and legalistic teaching? Or has your conscience been seared and hardened because of repeated sin? Make the commitment to God and to yourself to begin studying the Scriptures daily to inform your conscience with the principles of God's Word.
2. Read and meditate on 1 Corinthians 8:1–13 and 10:23–11:1 this week. Ask God for the wisdom to live the life of Christian liberty obtained for you by Christ, but to do so in a way that never places your own desires above love for the brethren.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Bridges, Jerry. *Transforming Grace*