

Sensitivity to the Spirit

16 - Nehemiah: A Time for Restoration
Church on the Park | Sunday, 21 FEB 2021 | Glen Gerhauser

Text: “It came about afterward that David’s conscience [*lev*, heart] bothered [*nacah*, struck] him because he had cut off the edge of Saul’s robe.” — 1 Samuel 24:5

Theme: Staying sensitive to the Holy Spirit is key to keeping on the breastplate of righteousness.

Intro: Saul was bent on killing David, pursuing him like someone would hunt a bird in the wild. Saul is now in a dark cave, vulnerable. Little does he know David and his men are hidden in the same cave. Saul is in David’s hand and David can easily and swiftly strike his greatest enemy, King Saul, dead. But instead, David values Saul’s life—King Saul is the Lord’s anointed—so he only cuts a small piece of Saul’s garment, defiling his robe, but saving his life. Saul didn’t even know what David did in the darkness; he had no knowledge that David was in the same cave. And even though David only cuts off the edge of Saul’s robe, his conscience is struck. This small act of dishonour cuts him to the heart. As a young worshipper and warrior, David has a sensitive conscience. The Lord also desires us to have a sensitive conscience—so sensitive that it is stuck by little acts of disobedience. Today, we will continue to talk about the breastplate of righteousness. How do you put on the breastplate or righteousness and keep it on? And how do you keep your conscience strong and sharp?

1) S - Stay sensitive to the Spirit (1 Samuel 24:5).

- Sadly, over the years David’s conscience begins to weaken.
 - He is not struck to his heart when he lusts after Bathsheba, commits adultery and then kills her husband Uriah.
 - It’s only a long while later when Nathan confronts him that he repents.
 - What happened to David? Why did this happen? And more importantly, how can we keep this from happening to us?
- *First, what is your conscience?*
 - The word ‘conscience’ appears often in the New Testament, about thirty times.
 - Our English word ‘conscience’ is made of two parts: ‘con’ meaning ‘with’ and ‘science’ meaning ‘knowledge’.
 - Simply put, your conscience is the inward knowledge you have within you of what is right and wrong, what is good and evil.
 - The Greek word is “συνείδησις *suneidēsis*; gen. *suneidēseōs*, fem. noun from *suneidō* (4894), to be conscious of. Conscience, to be one’s own witness, one’s own conscience coming forward as witness. It denotes an abiding consciousness whose nature it is to bear inner witness to one’s own conduct in a moral sense (Titus 1:15). It is self-awareness.” Zodiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.
 - “A capacity or faculty of moral intuition, consciousness, or reflection. A person’s internal awareness or sense of abiding by or transgressing moral standards. An internal witness to moral obligation based on intuition or self-assessment.” — Lexham Bible Dictionary
 - In Hebrew, the word for conscience is *lev*, which means heart.
 - So what we are dealing with when talking about your conscience is your heart. It’s your heart’s ability to know right from wrong.
 - To put on the breastplate of righteousness means you clearly to what is right and wrong in your heart and that your knowledge of good and evil comes from God himself, “the Spirit of knowledge” (Isaiah. 11:1-3; Eph 6:14).
 - It is the Spirit of God, God’s very own Spirit and Knowledge that gives us the awareness of what is right and wrong.
 - Before I was saved, I didn’t know God’s Spirit.
 - But once the Holy Spirit came in my life, I felt a deep conviction for things I was saying, thinking, watching and doing—even the records I was DJing.
 - John 16:7-11
 - The key to having a healthy conscience is staying sensitive to the Holy Spirit.

- You will backslide when you lose sensitivity to the Holy Spirit

2) T - Take daily care of your heart (Hebrews 3:12-15).

- Hebrews 3:12-15
- Sin is deceitful
- And when you engage in sin, it begins to harden your heart.
 - You start thinking something is right when its not.
 - You begin to live based on your feelings rather than God's Word.
- Your heart needs to be guarded daily.
 - This is one of the reasons great men and women can fall into hideous sins—even denying the Lord Jesus.
 - How?
 - They stop maintaining and guarding their heart. They allow little things to creep in. Soon those little things become big things.
- Putting on the breastplate of righteousness means maintaining your heart.
- The New Testament says that you can have a...
 - Weak conscience
 - Wounded conscience
 - Seared conscience
 - Defiled conscience
 - Evil conscience
 - Cleansed conscience
 - Clear conscience
 - Good conscience
 - Blameless conscience
- God's covenant: Hebrews 8:10-11
 - God's covenant with us is all about restoring our conscience so that it reflects God's mind, word and heart.

3) R - Respond to conviction with repentance (Hebrews 3:15).

- When you hear God's voice, don't harden your heart (Heb. 3:15).
 - Be quick to respond in repentance.
 - Repentance means to change your ways.
 - Repentance is simply turning from your sin and turning to God
 - When you repent you look for both forgiveness from God and strength to live right.
 - When you repent you make practical changes to keep you from doing the same sin over and over again.
- In Acts 2:37, the people were pierced to the heart by Peter's preaching.
 - But being pierced to the heart is not the end, you need to respond.
 - They responded by saying, "What must we do?" (Acts 2:37).
 - Then, they went and did exactly what Peter told them: "Repent and be baptised" (Acts 2:37-42).

4) U - Understand God's righteousness through his Word (Hebrews 5:13-14).

- Because your conscience may not be fully restored or you have defiled it in some way, your knowledge of righteousness and unrighteousness may be warped.
 - And this means it's very dangerous to live by your conscience, feelings, emotions, thoughts and desires.
- You need to let Jesus be like Nehemiah and restore this section of your inwardly broken walls and gates.
- And this is only possible by understanding and abiding in God's Word.
- Listen to Hebrews 5:13-14.

5) C - Commune with God and his people (Hebrews 3:13).

- It's through communion—cultivating intimacy with God—that you will know God better.
- But also remember, if you commune with God you will also commune with his covenant people.
- Listen to Hebrews 3:13.
- Also hear Hebrews Hebrews 10:19-25

6) K - Keep a clean conscience by the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:19-25).

- Notice what Hebrews 10:19-25 says, “having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”
- There is nothing like the blood of Jesus to truly cleanse your conscience.
- Even at the smallest deviation in your mind and heart, ask the blood of Jesus to wash you.
- 1 John 1:9

Conclusion: When you put these points into practice you will put on the breastplate of righteousness and keep it on. They spell the word STRUCK: 1) S - Stay sensitive to the Spirit, 2) T - Take daily care of your heart, 3) R - Respond to conviction with repentance, 4) U - Understand God’s righteousness through his Word, 5) C - Commune with God and his people and 6) K - Keep a clean conscience through the blood of Jesus.

END NOTES

Conscience A capacity or faculty of moral intuition, consciousness, or reflection. A person's internal awareness or sense of abiding by or transgressing moral standards. An internal witness to moral obligation based on intuition or self-assessment.

Overview

The conscience functions as a personal sense of one's conduct, character, or intentions. It can hold the role of a moral monitor, witness, judge, and guide. In the biblical materials, the conscience may also have a more generic sense of "consciousness" or private knowledge, or a reflexive "self-consciousness" (including a self-consciousness of negative moral feelings or guilt).

Old Testament Concepts

The feelings of regret, remorse, and self-condemnation seem to be a universal part of the human existence. For example, ancient Egyptians were counseled not to violate the directives of their own hearts (Atallah, "Objective Witness"). Social historians have investigated the pre-Israelite equivalents of the concept of moral conscience, including the sense of religious conscience or guilt (Assmann, *Transformations of the Inner Self*; Graham and May, *Culture and Conscience*). While cultural anthropologists emphasize culture's role in developing an individual's sense of conscience, Scripture portrays God as playing a vital role in this development. Rather than focusing on individualized moral introspection, the Old Testament highlights the external moral standard of the Law (Torah) and the communal covenant with God.

The Heart

Although the concept of "conscience" is not explicitly present in the Old Testament, the general concept of moral self-reflection does appear (Wyschogrod, "Judaism and Conscience," 75–81). For example, various psalms express a troubled moral consciousness and the relief of divine forgiveness (Pss 32; 51). Similarly, the prophetic writings can function as a form of social conscience (Vawter, "Conscience of Israel"; Holmgren, "Priests and Prophets," 50–52). In the absence of a specific word for "conscience," the word "heart" (לֵב, *lev*) is used to connote self-awareness, including moral emotions and judgments. The heart is viewed as the core of the person and functions as the seat of feelings such as remorse or obligation. It is also depicted as the location of reflection or inner judgment (compare 1 Sam 24:5; 25:31; 2 Sam 24:10). For example, 2 Samuel 24:10 states, "The heart of David struck him after he had counted the people, and David said to Yahweh, 'I have sinned greatly in what I have done. So then, O Yahweh, please forgive the guilt of your servant because I have acted very foolishly.'" Here David expresses the notion of a guilty or troubled conscience. Job implies the concept of a clear conscience when he declares, "I hold fast to my righteousness, and I will not let it go; my heart will not blame any of my days" (Job 27:6).

Greek and Latin Translations

The Greek word for "conscience" (συνείδησις, *syneidēsis*) appears several times in the Septuagint:

- It is used in the Greek translation of Eccl 10:20 to refer to one's hidden, internal thoughts.
- Verbal variations appear in the Septuagint of Job 27:6 and Lev 5:1.
- Wisdom 17:11 uses the term in discussing an internal admission of wickedness: "Wickedness is cowardly in itself and stands self-condemned. Someone with a guilty

conscience (συνείδησις, *syneidēsis*) will always imagine things to be worse than they really are” (GNT).

- A variant of the term appears in Sirach 42:18.

The Vulgate uses the Latin term *conscientia* in Gen 43:22 and Eccl 7:23.

Intertestamental Period

Vocabulary related to the idea of “conscience” is absent from rabbinic writings and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Yet notions of a “bad” conscience and a “good” conscience appear in Graeco-Roman writings prior to the New Testament. Several schools of philosophy used the term “conscience” (συνείδησις, *syneidēsis*), including Stoicism (compare Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.22.94). Additionally, Cicero and Seneca spoke of a “good” conscience (*conscientia*). Although the New Testament usage of “conscience” (συνείδησις, *syneidēsis*) does not seem to borrow directly from any particular school of philosophy, the popular use of the term may have informed Paul’s writings regarding the topic—particularly 1 Cor 8–10 (Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament*).

New Testament Development

The New Testament reveals a growing notion of the conscience as a witness, confirmation, and guide. The Greek word “conscience” (συνείδησις, *syneidēsis*) appears 30 times in the New Testament. Twenty of those occurrences are in Paul’s writings—eleven of which are in 1 Corinthians. Verbal forms of the term occur only four times.

In the New Testament, the term “conscience” could refer to:

- a basic notion of self-understanding or self-awareness
- a bad feeling
- a moral sense of right and wrong that assesses one’s specific actions

The Gospels

Neither the Synoptic Gospels nor John’s writings (including his letters) use the term “conscience” (συνείδησις, *syneidēsis*; with the exception of variants of the *pericope adulterae* in John 8:9). However, the concept of a conscience may be present in the parable of the Prodigal Son, where the son “came to himself” (Luke 15:17–18), and in the description of the enlightened “eye” in Luke 11:33–36 (Zodhiates, *Conscience*). Similarly, John 16:8–11 speaks of the world being convicted because of its sin, and 1 John 3:19–22 speaks of the human heart condemning the individual.

Acts

The term “conscience” (συνείδησις, *syneidēsis*) appears twice in the book of Acts. Both occurrences are in speeches by the Apostle Paul:

1. In Acts 23:1 Paul claims, “Men and brothers, I have lived my life in all good conscience before God to this day.”
2. In Acts 24:16, after mentioning the hope of future resurrection, Paul speaks of a blameless conscience: “For this reason also I myself always do my best to have a clear conscience toward God and people.”

Paul’s Writings

Two-thirds of the New Testament instances of the term “conscience” (συνείδησις, *syneidēsis*) are in Paul’s writings. The most sustained discussion of the conscience within Paul’s writings and the New Testament as a whole is Paul’s assessment of eating meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8–10; Gooch, “‘Conscience’”). Stepien notes that the conscience is a key facet of Paul’s anthropology (Stepien, “*Syneidēsis*”). Paul calls believers to maintain a pure conscience. According to Paul, people’s behavior should not be contrary

to their convictions—they should neither act against their own consciences nor encourage others to act against theirs (1 Cor 8:7–13). He further argues that actions that violate conscience do not arise out of faith (1 Cor 8:7–13; 10:23–30; Rom 14:23). The willful violation of conscience disregards one’s personal wholeness and integrity (compare Rom 14:23; Cranfield, “Some Observations”; Lloyd-Jones, *Romans*).

The term “conscience” (συνείδησις, *syneidēsis*) has a broad range of meaning in Paul’s writings. Scholars such as Pierce interpret “conscience” (συνείδησις, *syneidēsis*) as a self-awareness parallel to a confidant from whom nothing can be concealed (Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament*). Others, like Horsley, view “conscience” (συνείδησις, *syneidēsis*) as parallel to “consciousness,” with a focus on intention (Horsley, “Consciousness and Freedom”). Ultimately, the idea of “conscience” seems to envelop both dimensions: It can be translated as moral “self-awareness” or moral “consciousness” in 1 Cor 8:7–13, and it may carry a sense of guilt or remorse in 1 Cor 10:25–30. The conscience may be either “emboldened” (1 Cor 8:10) or “wounded” (1 Cor 8:12), and it may be “weak” or “defiled” (1 Cor 8:7, 10, 12). Paul did not wish for the “weak” to stumble and be destroyed (1 Cor 8:11–13).

Conscience as a Moral Compass. In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul depicts the conscience as an internal moral compass (Gooch, “‘Conscience’ ”). In the context of a community, this leads to respect for different understandings of the demands of the Christian life (Reinhard, “Conscience”). Personal conscience is integrated with a notion of personal liberty guided by charity (1 Cor 10:31–33) and is formed by maturity (compare 1 Cor 8:7–13; Heb 5:12–14). In the specific case of food sacrificed to idols, Paul advised his readers not to ask questions concerning food purchased in the meat market “for the sake of conscience” (1 Cor 10:25). Similarly, when invited to eat at an unbeliever’s house, Paul recommended that no questions be asked “for the sake of conscience” (1 Cor 10:27). He adds, “But if someone says to you, ‘This is offered to idols,’ do not eat it, for the sake of that one who informed you and the conscience. Now I am not speaking about your own conscience, but the conscience of the other person. For why is my freedom judged by another’s conscience?” (1 Cor 10:28–29).

Conscience as a Witness. Paul further portrays the conscience as a “witness” to something (Rom 2:15; 9:1; 2 Cor 1:12; 4:2; 5:11; Reicke, “*Syneidēsis*”), as in Rom 2:14–15: “For whenever the Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature the things of the law, these, although they do not have the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written on their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts one after another accusing or even defending them” (Atallah, “Objective Witness”). In this case, Paul portrays the conscience as a God-given alarm system regarding poor behavior. The conscience can also urge someone to act in a positive manner. For example, in the context of obedience to government, Paul states, “Therefore *it is* necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience” (Rom 13:5; Stringfellow, *Conscience & Obedience*).

Conscience as a Moral Standard. Paul seems to propose that the “conscience” performed a similar function to the Law (Thrall, “Pauline Use,” 124; Good, “Conscience,” 251–52). Nevertheless, the conscience is not the ultimate standard of moral goodness. Having a clear conscience (e.g., 2 Cor 1:12) does not necessarily mean that a person is without fault. Likewise, the conscience does not function as an infallible or supreme standard, as the Lord is the ultimate judge (1 Cor 4:4; compare Acts 5:2). Nevertheless, use of one’s conscience clearly shapes one’s character (Packer, “Conscience, Choice and Character”).

Modern research demonstrates that consciences are shaped by parents, teachers, and mentors, and can be informed by acculturation and instruction. Additionally, people can

internalize wider social customs as personal expectations. Thus, the conscience is neither the direct voice of God nor an infallible guide. Yet a properly sensitized conscience can function as a moral “alarm system.” Therefore, the conscience should be guarded and respected. Paul speaks of the conscience in connection with God (2 Cor 1:12; 4:2) and the Holy Spirit (Rom 9:1). He was concerned with helping others maintain a healthy conscience (2 Cor 4:2; 5:11). For Paul, a “weak” conscience is based on a wrong value system or inadequate knowledge; those with “weak” consciences must be instructed (1 Cor 8:7) and their minds renewed (compare Rom 12:1–2). In this view, because the conscience can be cultivated and calibrated, it must be educated, informed, and tended.

Pastoral Letters

“Conscience” (συνείδησις, *syneidēsis*) appears six times in the Pastoral Letters, always combined with an attributive adjective (1 Tim 1:5, 19; 3:9; 4:2; 2 Tim 1:3; Titus 1:15). Overall, the Pastoral Letters emphasize the importance of “having faith and a good conscience” (1 Tim 1:19). First Timothy 1:5 states that “the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a faith without hypocrisy.” The Pastorals also speak of a “defiled” conscience (Titus 1:15) and of a “seared” conscience (1 Tim 4:2), thus indicating that individuals do not always feel guilty when they commit moral error. Believers are encouraged to hold “the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 Tim 3:9). Using the same adjective “clean” or “pure” (καθαρός, *katharos*), Paul declared, “I am thankful to God, whom I have served with a clear conscience as my ancestors did” (2 Tim 1:3).

Hebrews

While Paul frequently uses “conscience” in discussions of human relationships, the book of Hebrews focuses on one’s conscience before God (Selby, “Meaning and Function”). Hebrews speaks of the new covenant ministry of the law written on the hearts of believers (Heb 8:10; 10:16). According to Hebrews 10:2, under the old covenant the sacrifice of animals could not cleanse the conscience, resulting in a continued awareness of sinfulness. The tabernacle “was a symbol for the present time, in which both the gifts and sacrifices which were offered were not able to perfect the worshiper with respect to the conscience” (Heb 9:9).

The author of Hebrews argues that the believer’s conscience has been cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ so that it no longer accuses and condemns (Heb 9:14; 10:22). Hebrews speaks of both a cleansed conscience (Heb 9:14) and a “good conscience” (Heb 13:18), exhorting believers, “let us approach with a true heart in the full assurance of faith, our hearts sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb 10:22). The author refers to the “conscience” in the closing of the letter: “Pray for us, for we are convinced that we have a good conscience, *and* want to conduct ourselves commendably in every way” (Heb 13:18).

1 and 2 Peter

First and Second Peter use “conscience” in context of how Christians, as “aliens and strangers,” are to conduct themselves in the midst of opposition:

- First Peter 2:19 speaks of those who suffer unjustly because of “conscience toward God” or “consciousness of God.”
- First Peter 3:16 affirms, “having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.”
- First Peter 3:21 describes baptism as “the answer of a good conscience toward God” or “an appeal to God for a good conscience” (Colwell, “Baptism, Conscience”).

Early Church

In the first century ad, Philo reflects a theology of the conscience as a normative sense shaped by the law (Bosman, *Conscience in Philo and Paul*). The Greek word “conscience” (συνείδησις, *syneidēsis*) appears in the following writings from the early church:

- the *Didache* 4.14
- Ignatius’ Epistle to the Trallians 7.2
- Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philipppians 5.3
- the *Letter of Barnabas* 19.12
- the Shepherd of Hermas (Mandate 1.4)
- 2 Clement 16.4
- 1 Clement 1.7; 2.4; 34.7; 41.1; 45.7

History of Interpretation

Largely grounded on the discussion of conscience in 1 Cor 8–10, the Reformers expounded theologies of personal conscience regarding “doubtful matters” (*adiaphora*). Throughout history, interpreters have reflected on the notion of the freedom of conscience, along with the related concepts of religious liberty and toleration. While grounded in a New Testament theology of conscience (especially Paul’s discussions of personal conscience), the topic has developed in various ways through interreligious dialogue and legal application. By reflecting on a theology of personal conscience, early modern theologians elaborated on rich notions of “individual soul liberty” and “individual soul competence,” especially in early Baptist traditions. Some recent scholars have tried to integrate the biblical materials with psychological studies (Rozell, “Implications”) and pastoral counseling (Borchert, “Romans”).

Selected Resources for Further Study

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