

SERMON
Claiming a Clear Conscience
Text: Hebrew 9:6-14

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October 2015

Throughout his administration, Abraham Lincoln was a president under fire, especially during the scarring years of the Civil War. And though he knew he would make errors of office, he resolved never to compromise his integrity. So strong was this resolve that he once said, "I desire so to conduct the affairs of this administration that if at the end, when I come to lay down the reins of power, I have lost every other friend on earth, I shall at least have one friend left, and that friend shall be down inside of me." What Lincoln was really saying was that at the end to the day "he wanted his conscience to be clear".

The function of the conscience in ethical decision making tends to complicate matters for us. The commandments of God are eternal, but in order to obey them we must first appropriate them internally. The "organ" of such internalization has been classically called the conscience. Some describe this nebulous inner voice as the voice of God within. The conscience is a mysterious part of man's inner being. Within the conscience, in a secret hidden recess, lies the personality, so hidden that at times it functions without our being immediately aware of it. When Freud brought hypnosis into the palace of respectable scientific inquiry, men began to explore the subconscious and examine those intimate caverns of the personality. Encountering the conscience can be an awesome experience. The uncovering of the inner voice can be, as one psychiatrist notes, like "looking into hell itself."

Yet we tend to think of conscience as a heavenly thing, a point of contact with God, rather than a hellish organ. We think of the cartoon character faced with an ethical decision while an angel is perched on one shoulder and a devil on the other, playing tug-of-war with the poor man's head. The conscience can be a voice from heaven or hell; it can lie as well as press us to truth. It is a voice with two sides to its mouth, having the capacity either to *accuse* or to *excuse*.

Walt Disney made popular the jingle "Let your conscience be your guide." This is at best Jiminy Cricket theology. For the Christian the conscience is not the highest court of appeals for right conduct. The conscience is important, but not normative. It is capable of distortion and misguidance. It is mentioned some thirty-one times in the New Testament with abundant indication of its capacity for change. The conscience can be seared and eroded, being desensitized by repeated sin. Jeremiah described Israel as having the "brazen look of a prostitute" (Jeremiah 3:3, NIV). From repeated transgressions Israel had, like the prostitute, lost her capacity to blush. With the stiffened neck and the hardened heart came also the calloused conscience. The sociopath can murder without remorse, being immune to the normal pangs of conscience.

In the text before us today, the writer seeks to remind his readers that Judaism was merely a religion of types and shadows that find their reality in Christ. He argues here that Christ is better than the Judaism because Judaism could not make the worshipper perfect in conscience (v9). The word "teleioo" is translated perfect and carries the meaning "complete". The writer is trying to

show his readers that ritualistic ceremonial adherences could not help to make a clean or a clear conscience. And so as a result, the people were coming to worship/church, but with incomplete consciences. In other words, they were not free from Guilt.

According to the dictionary, guilt is defined as a "feeling of responsibility or remorse for some offense, crime, wrong, etc., whether real or imagined." A guilty conscience is just that, a component of our human conscience that condemns us for our thoughts, words and actions. This innate ingredient acts as our moral judge that gets us to realize that we acted outside of our norm. This moral judge serves us well when we truly have fallen short but when it is just a misperception of something we did it can slow down our progress in life.

There are several kinds of guilt. Let us examine some of them to see which ones you can relate to.

Introspective Guilt: This guilty feeling is necessary for bringing awareness to our actions and making us realize where we fell short. It nags at us, giving us that strange feeling in the pit of our stomachs until we have corrected the problem.

Perceived Guilt: This is false sense of guilt for feeling responsible for something you didn't do. The negative emotion that surrounds you leaves you unable to forgive yourselves for something you perceived you did that was wrong. It can lead to feelings of shame and worthlessness that can result in depression and the inability to stay focused on what is important to you. This kind of guilt has the power to destroy you and must be addressed at once.

Retrospective Guilt: This guilt can last for years to come and damage your psyche. Its causes you to relive the past believing that there was something you should have done to prevent some previous event. This guilt can cause you to lose self-confidence and self-esteem and interfere with your success. We all have experienced things in our past that we may not be proud of. Beating yourself up for something that happened in the past that may not even have been your fault is a waste of mental energy

Religious Guilt: Fear of punishment from God results in strong feelings of guilt. People with a strong religious upbringing are conditioned to quickly feel guilty for fear that they may have sinned. As a child I was raised in a very strict religious home. So strict I couldn't even wear slacks because they are a man's apparel. I heard "no" or "you can't" quite often. As I grew into adulthood, my perception of normal things were so skewed that I experienced unnecessary guilt. This moral guilt can affect one's emotional state of mind leading them to believe they are "bad", which is what I felt for many years. The internal labeling can weaken the human spirit and result in feelings of shame. Speaking to an objective professional can help to remove many of these guilty feelings created by the rules of religion.

Guilt must be put in its proper perspective in order for us to grow from it and not succumb to negative feelings that can hinder our success in life. Let us dissect the dynamics behind a guilty conscience so we can see guilt in its proper light.

Guilt Can Sabotage You

A chronic guilty conscience has the ability to hold one back from achieving their goals in life. As you hold on to the guilt it can slowly undermine your capacity to think and function on a normal level. You may begin to act in ways that are uncharacteristic of you. You may even undergo personality changes, believing something is wrong with you.

Here are some ways that guilt can sabotage your future. It can

- destroy your self-esteem
- erode your self-confidence
- cause you to become your worst critic
- cause you to lose self-respect
- distort your perception of self
- obstruct your ability to make decisions
- create self-doubt
- cause you to be unforgiving of self
- bring about fearfulness
- cause irrational thoughts
- cause paranoia
- cause you to ignore self
- cause feelings of worthlessness and shame
- send you into a state of worry
- generate anxiety and panic
- trigger depression

The above are only some of the psychological effects that guilt can have on you. This does not even take into consideration how this emotional state of mind can also affect one's physical health.

Guilt is a normal emotion. However, it can turn on us if we allow it to consume our minds. Remember, although guilt is self-imposed it is so powerful that it can influence your life in ways that can destroy you. All your plans and goals for the future would have to be put on hold as you become paralyzed by your guilt.

The writer says to his readers and to us today that issues of conscience and guilt are very real and the our help and hope for salvation does not rest in the blood of animals who could neither say yes or no to being a sacrifice. But our salvation and conscience completion rest in the blood of the One who offered Himself to God to cleanse our conscience from dead works to serve the Living God. Well, I said it is the blood of Christ! You cannot find cleansing for it in self-help seminars, you will not find cleansing for it in popular psychology, nor by using the latest approved anti-depressant drugs.

The songwriter William Cowper suffered from bouts of insanity. In 1763 he was offered a Clerkship of Journals in the House of Lords, but broke under the strain of the approaching examination and experienced a period of insanity. At this time he tried three times to commit suicide and was sent to Nathaniel Cotton's asylum at St. Albans for recovery. In 1773, Cowper experienced an attack of insanity, imagining not only that he was eternally condemned to hell,

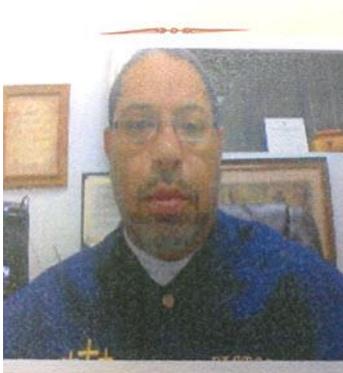
but that God was commanding him to make a sacrifice of his own life. And yet this tormented soul is the same one the penned the immortal words:

There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins, And sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stain...

The whole world stands guilty before God and our consciences reminds us daily that we have sinned and come short of his glory. But, thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...Who HUNG, SUFFERED, **BLED**, AND DIED. I said He bled...He had to bleed... "for without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins, there is no laying down our burdens, no fixing of the heart, no regulating of the mind, no lifting up of bowed down heads, no cleansing of the conscience"...He Bled! Oh Yes!

And I'm glad to tell you today that "The blood still works"... Yes it does! It reaches to the highest mountain...It flows to the lowest valley... Yes... It gives me strength...(somebody help me say it!) from day to day...It will never lose its power. O, Oo, O yes!

There is power...yes...wonder working power...in the blood of the LAMB!



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