

TOUGH TOPICS:

CONSCIENCE

WHAT IT IS

- **Definition:** “The conscience is your consciousness of what you believe is right and wrong.”
 - Conscience produces different results for people based on different moral standards.
 - Conscience can change.
 - Conscience functions as a guide, monitor, witness, and judge.

HOW TO TRAIN IT

Your conscience can rightly guide or condemn you

- What can we say to unbelievers who carry the weight of guilt?
 - *“The wisdom of our age says guilt feelings are nearly always erroneous or hurtful; therefore we should switch them off...The conscience is generally seen by the modern world as a defect that robs people of their self-esteem. Far from being a defect or a disorder, however, our ability to sense our own guilt is a tremendous gift from God.” - John Macarthur*
 - Only the gospel can comfort a non-Christian’s guilt-racked conscience.
- The super-charged conscience of a Christian (Jer. 31:33-34)
 - *“Only the cross can fill that ever-widening gap between your consciousness of what you ought to be and your actual obedience. As you mature in your faith, you grow increasingly in love with Christ and his gospel; you place your trust more and more in Christ to make you acceptable before God; and you wait with greater and greater anticipation for the day when Christ will come back and make your obedience match your knowledge.” - David Naselli*
 - When your conscience rightly condemns you, you should confess to God and any other person you’ve sinned against. Look to Jesus.

Your conscience can wrongly guide or condemn you.

- 9/11 terrorism | Snake handlers

Should you listen to your conscience or change it?

- 3 ways you conscience is formed and informed:

- Your conscience may become more hardened through the deceitfulness of sin
- Your conscience might follow the standards of other people such as your culture, family, or spiritual leaders.
- Your conscience might conform more to truth, especially the truth of God's Word.
 - *"Unless I am convicted by scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen."* - **Martin Luther**
- **Key question:** What is your conscience tuned to?
 - Calibration is tuning an instrument with a standard to ensure that it is functioning accurately
 - *"We should do what our conscience says until we are convinced from Scripture that it needs adjusting...Whenever 'obey conscience!' collides with 'obey God!'—'obey God!' must come out on top—every time."* - **Andy Naselli**

How should you tune your conscience?

- Educate it with truth
 - A regular diet of scripture will strengthen a weak conscience or restrain an overactive one.
- Use addition and subtraction
 - **Addition** - Sometimes we need to tune our conscience by adding biblical commands to it.
 - **Subtraction** - Sometimes we need to tune our conscience by subtracting commands from it. (i.e. "commandments of men")

LOVING THOSE WHO DIFFER

Theological triage

- **First:** 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 says, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." - i.e. authority of scripture, the Trinity, atonement...etc.
- **Second:** The secondary doctrines are not direct gospel issues, and genuine Christians disagree on them. However, they are urgent for the church, because they have implications for the gospel - i.e. - baptism, church government, role of men and women in the church and home.

- **Third:** These issues are neither essential to the gospel nor urgent for the church. This includes more disputable matters - worship styles, bible translations, many practical questions

Conscience Controversies in the Early Church

- Typical church in Paul's day consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians
 - **Jews** - coming from religious culture with restrictive dietary and holy day laws - most Jewish Christians carried this strictness into their new faith.
 - **Gentiles** - did not have this strict background - Gentile Christians often learning healthy separation from their old ways.
- Triage | Confrontations
 - **Galatians 2** - Peter eats separate from Gentiles | **Level 1 Gospel issue**
 - **1 Cor. 5** - Man is sleeping with his father's wife | **Level 1 Gospel issue**

Romans 14:1-15:7

- **SUMMARY**
 - **Strong vs. Weak in Faith:** The Roman church was divided between "strong" Christians who understood their freedom from Jewish dietary laws and holy days, and "weak" Christians who felt bound by those traditions.
 - **Non-Essentials:** The disagreements were over matters like what to eat and which days to observe, which Paul categorizes as non-essential issues of conscience rather than foundational gospel truths.
- **PRINCIPLES**
 - 1. Welcome those who disagree with you. (Rom. 14:1-2)
 - 2. Those who have freedom of conscience must not look down on those who don't. (Rom. 14:3-4)
 - 3. Those whose conscience restricts them must not be judgmental toward those who have freedom. (Rom. 14:3-4)
 - 4. Each believer must be fully convinced of their position in their own conscience. (Rom. 14:5)
 - 5. Assume that others are partaking or refraining for the glory of God. (Rom. 14:6-9)
 - 6. Do not judge each other in these matters because we will all someday stand before the judgment seat of God. (Rom. 14:10-12)
 - 7. Your freedom may be correct, but don't let your freedom destroy the faith of a weak brother. (Rom. 14:13-15)
 - 8. Disagreements about eating and drinking are not important in the kingdom of God; building each other up in righteousness, peace, and joy is the important thing. (Rom. 14:16-21)

- 9. If you have freedom, don't flaunt it; if you are strict, don't expect others to be strict like you. (Rom. 14:22a)
- 10. A person who lives according to their conscience is blessed. (Rom. 14:22b-23)
- 11. We must follow the example of Christ, who put others first. (Rom. 15:1-6)
- 12. We glorify God when we welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us. (Rom. 15:7)

The glory of God, love of brother, and unity of the church should be the driving forces when thinking about disputable matters of conscience.

"Christian freedom is not 'I always do what I want.' Nor is it 'I always do whatever the other person wants.' It is 'I do what brings glory to God. I do what brings others under the influence of the gospel. I do what leads to peace in the church.'" - Andy Naselli

QUESTIONS

- What are some challenges to maintaining unity within a church by loving fellow believers when your consciences disagree about disputable matters?
- What is a specific way you can love a fellow church member who has a weaker conscience on a particular disputable matter?
- What is a specific way you can love a fellow church member who has a stronger conscience on a particular disputable matter?