

The guilty conscience

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to read now from God's Word, so please take your Bible and turn to page 1131, where you should find Romans chapter 1. I'm going to start reading at verse 18 and read to the end of the chapter.

Romans chapter 1, starting at verse 18. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.

So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him.

But they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

[1 : 3 8] Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature, rather than the creator who is blessed forever.

Amen. For this reason, God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature.

And the men likewise gave up natural relations with women, and were consumed with passion for one another. Men committing shameless acts with men, and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness.

[2 : 5 6] They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Though they know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die, may not only do them, but give approval to those who practice them.

The second reading is from Hebrews chapter 9, verses 1 to 14, on page 1208.

Hebrews chapter 9, verses 1 to 14. Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness.

For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the presence. It is called the holy place.

[4 : 0 0] Behind the second curtain was a second section called the most holy place, having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant.

Above it were the cherubim of the glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, but into the second section only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.

By this, the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened, as long as the first section is still standing, which is symbolic for the present age.

According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent, not made with hands, that is, not of this creation, he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves, but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

[5 : 5 2] For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of defiled person with the ashes of a hypha sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

Why don't I lead us in prayer? Let's pray together. Earlier on in Hebrews, the writer says, Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for this great privilege we have of an open Bible and being able to look at the Bible together this morning and hearing your voice. And please would you guard us from hardening our hearts.

Please grant us sensitive, teachable hearts that our minds and lives might be transformed by your word as your spirit works in us.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, if you have read the program card, then you'll know this is the first of two talks on conscience.

[7 : 1 3] Now, it may be that some of us haven't really thought about our consciences very much at all. Perhaps our conscience operates somewhat in the background, rather like an app on your phone, constantly updating itself, but you are largely unaware of it.

In which case, my aim for these two talks is that we take our conscience off the shelf, dust it down, and bring it back into daily life.

After all, we all have a conscience. Our conscience exerts a moral force inside us, like a referee in a football match.

It gives us a sense of what is right and wrong. It's our conscience that makes us aware that this particular thing over here is wrong, or that that particular thing over here, over there, is right.

It makes us feel bad if we do wrong things. It makes us feel at peace when we do what we think is the right thing. Rather like an umpire in a cricket match, it tells us, doesn't it, internally, when it is we've overstepped the line, we can appeal to our consciences in order to know whether something is right or whether it is wrong.

[8 : 3 3] So we all have a conscience, and we all listen to our conscience, perhaps as a job which we're thinking of applying for, or a relationship that's developing.

I feel really good about it. It feels like the right thing to do. I have a sense of peace about it. That is my conscience.

Or I feel uneasy about it, and it doesn't feel right. That is the voice of conscience. And of course, it's a voice, isn't it, which never goes away.

It can be rather annoying. Sometimes, I'd rather not hear that little voice inside me ringing alarm bells. And then, when we do something, of course, that our conscience disagrees with, and tells us is wrong, actually, it can make our lives profoundly miserable.

We feel guilty, fearful, uncertain. Indeed, a guilty conscience led Judas Iscariot to commit suicide, having betrayed the Lord Jesus.

[9 : 47] Which raises the question, is conscience a friend, or is it a foe? Friend or foe? Well, today we're going to think about the joy, both the joy of a cleansed conscience, as well, beforehand, there's the problem of a guilty conscience.

And then, in the second talk of the series, which I apologize, you're going to have to wait until after Easter for the second talk in the series. But in the second talk in the series, we're going to be thinking about training our consciences, and to what extent, or not, we should listen to our consciences.

And there's an outline, as usual, on the back of the service sheet, which I hope we're going to find useful. First of all, the suppressed conscience. And please turn back to that reading we had from Romans, chapter 1.

Romans, chapter 1, page 1131, verses 18 to 32. Now, if you're familiar with Romans, then you will know that the first three chapters of the letter, the Apostle Paul gives us God's diagnosis, if you like, for what is wrong with the world.

And why it is that everyone, everyone, without exception, faces the judgment of God. He's leading up to chapter 3, verse 23, where he's going to say, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

[11 : 16] At which point, I guess our natural tendency is to push back and say, but surely not everyone. To which Paul says, yes, everyone.

And Romans 1, 18 to 32, shows us why. And it is because we naturally suppress the truth about God. And so, rather than worshipping the God who made us, the God who is God, we worship other things instead.

Have a look at Romans 1, 18 to 23. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

For what could be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.

So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened.

[12 : 34] Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Now notice, really, verses 19 and 20 that everyone knows that God exists.

Everyone knows from creation that God exists. In other words, we look at the world, we look at the natural beauty of the world, the natural order of the world, the scientist, of course, looks at the world through his or her microscope, the rest of us, the kind of bigger picture of the world, and we instinctively know there is a creator.

or, as we might say, that is something we all know deeply within our consciences. Before I became a Christian, I knew in my conscience that God existed.

And yet, verse 18, we all suppress that truth. And so, verses 19 to 23, instead of honoring and worshiping God, we worship created things.

In the ancient world, as in so many cultures today, statues and idols, statues of gods. In 21st century Britain, the equally powerful gods of wealth and leisure and success, relationships and happiness and so on.

[13 : 53] But then look on to verse 32. Because, you see, not only do we suppress what our consciences tell us about the existence of God, we also suppress what they tell us about the judgments, verse 32.

Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

It's very striking, isn't it? Paul is saying we all know not only that God exists but, verse 32, we all know there will be a judgment. there will be a day of accountability.

We know that in our conscience and yet we ignore it and we continue to live as if there won't be. So putting together Romans 1, 18 to 32, what are the two things everyone knows deeply in their consciences?

There is a God and there will be a day of judgment. And yet, what do we naturally do to that voice of conscience? we suppress it. And over time, the voice of conscience gets quieter and quieter and quieter and easier to ignore.

[15 : 15] There's a car that's parked outside our house often or if not literally outside our house then outside the houses around about us and it has a faulty alarm. So, you know, the car alarm irritatingly goes off at completely random moments.

Well, the first time that happens, I kind of rush to the front door, open the front door, fully expecting to confront the burglar guilty in the act.

Now, it was, of course, a false alarm. I don't know actually what I'd have done if the burglar really had been there and I had caught the burglar in the act but that's something perhaps to speculate on. But nonetheless, it was a false alarm.

And over time, so as over the last year or so, I've learned to ignore the alarm. And I guess now it probably still goes off, I hear it occasionally but most of the time I barely notice it.

Similar to the way in which we treat our conscience. not that our conscience sounds false alarms when it speaks to us about the existence of God and the judgment to come but we get used to ignoring the alarm bells of our conscience.

[16 : 35] And the more we ignore our conscience, the better we get at ignoring our conscience. Such that even when we do hear our conscience, actually we don't really give it the attention it needs.

The suppressed conscience. Let's think secondly about the unreliable conscience and keep a finger or your talk outline in Romans and turn on to the next book of the Bible to 1 Corinthians chapter 8.

Page 1151. 1 Corinthians chapter 8. Now some of us may remember this chapter from when we looked at 1 Corinthians a couple of years ago when it was our book of the year.

The issue in chapters 8 to 10 is the issue of food sacrifice to idols. Most of the meat you wouldn't have gone along to Tesco's or Sainsbury's to buy your meat for a barbecue or whatever it was.

You'd have had to go to the temple. Most of the meat that was for sale in Corinth would have been sacrificed to a pagan god in the temple beforehand. I guess it's not really an equivalent but I guess buying halal meat might begin to give us a sense of what was going on.

[17 : 55] And there are some Christians in Corinth and their consciences are saying to them you shouldn't eat this meat because it's been sacrificed first of all to an idol. It's been sacrificed to a pagan god.

In other words they believe deeply in their consciences that they shouldn't eat it. Verse 7 Some through former association with idols eat food as really offered to an idol and their conscience being weak is defiled.

They feel it deeply. It's something they are sensitive about. It's something their conscience speaks to them about. And yet and this is the key thing to grasp.

They are wrong. Their conscience is wrong. Because idol gods don't have any real existence. They are simply blocks of stone or wood.

Have a look at verses 4 to 6. Paul says idols don't exist. Verse 4 Therefore as the eating of food offered to idols we know that an idol has no real existence and that there is no god but one.

[19 : 10] For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth as indeed there are many gods and many lords yet for us there is one god the father from whom all things and for whom we exist and one lord Jesus Christ through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Idols don't exist. They are pretend gods. The fact that food has been sacrificed to an idol why it's just meaningless. Now we're going to come back to 1 Corinthians chapter 8 in the second talk because Paul will say there are times when you should listen to your conscience even though it is wrong.

But for now simply notice that our conscience can be wrong. It is not a reliable guide. the Old Testament puts it like this.

I put some references there on the outline. Proverbs 14 verse 12 there is a way that seems right to a man but its end is the way to death. Jeremiah 17 verse 9 the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick.

Indeed God says that sometimes a whole culture will distort its sort of corporate culture conscience its collective conscience so that people will in the words of Isaiah 5 verse 20 call evil good and good evil and put darkness for light and light for darkness.

[20 : 43] In other words conscience can become so twisted so distorted that it's not just inaccurate it is completely reversed.

under who remembers the Disney character Pinocchio and the little figure of Jiminy Cricket who is Pinocchio's conscience and the song that he sings to Pinocchio with the title Give a Little Whistle I'm going to spare you the song don't worry about that but the point is simply that whenever Pinocchio is unsure and uncertain about what he should do what's right what's wrong and the idea is he needs a whistle to Jiminy Cricket who will come along and advise him and the punchline for the song has the famous phrase always let your conscience be your guide always let your conscience be your guide really always is what I think is right always right is what I regard as wrong always wrong and what about when my conscience differs from your conscience if I think it's right and you think it's wrong well have a think about these words from one of the confessions that we say in church as we confess our sin we earnestly repent and are truly sorry for all our misdoings the memory of them is grievous to us the burden of them is intolerable really the memory grievous the burden intolerable surely for most of us most of the time actually we don't think of our sin like that we don't take our sin that seriously in short you see our consciences are unreliable guides some of us

I guess have overly sensitive consciences others the opposite just as I may feel physically healthy when in fact I'm suffering from the early stages of some terrible degenerative and progressive disease and I may feel very ill when I'm suffering from a cold especially if it's the man cold variety in both cases you see how I actually feel in the moment within myself is an unreliable guide to the true state of my health in the same way in my conscience I may feel that something is okay when it's not and I may sometimes feel something is not okay when in fact it is and yet and perhaps this is really the thing for us to think about and dwell on and yet when it comes to making choices and decisions and setting priorities in life why the language our culture shouts at us is that you should go where your conscience leads you isn't that what our world says to us all the time just go where your conscience leads you do what is right for you as if our conscience is reliable there's even the Christian version of that kind of thinking go where your conscience leads you it's well we speak about feeling at peace about something

I already feel at peace about this job I already feel at peace about this relationship as if our conscience is always right as if whether I feel at peace about something or not is the kind of definitive guide as to whether it's the right course of action or the wrong course of action but no our consciences are unreliable we suppress our consciences and they are unreliable thirdly let's think about the guilty conscience turn back to Romans and Romans chapter 2 page 1132 now we said earlier the first three chapters of Romans are all heading to chapter 3 verse 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God Paul is going to get everyone to the point where they despair of themselves where they see that they have suppressed the truth about God and turn to

Jesus for forgiveness but you say how is that going to happen I mean if you've got a Bible it's fairly obvious isn't it how it's going to happen because the Bible tells us but what if you don't have a Bible well the answer is you have a conscience verse 14 for when Gentiles who do not have the law by nature do what the law requires there are a law to themselves even though they do not have the law they show that the work of the law is written on their hearts while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them notice everyone has what Paul says and describes in verse 15 as a law written in their hearts the law of conscience in other words you don't need a Bible to know that rape or murder or kidnapping are wrong because you see in everyone there remains a sense of right and wrong it's part of the residue of God's image we began our service this morning thinking about the fact that we are made in God's image and it's part of the residue of God's image that is in each one of us which means that even though we naturally suppress our conscience and even though our conscience is an unreliable guide and gets distorted and hardened nonetheless you and I each one of us we all know don't we what it means to have a guilty conscience both before other people before ourselves and before

[27:16] God and we all know I take it what the power of a guilty conscience feels like one of the news stories a couple of weeks ago was focused on John Ford a private investigator who confessed to targeting senior members of the Labour government between 1997 and 2010 he stole their bank details he hacked into their mobile phones he intercepted their posts now why is it that eight years later he decided to go public and confess well he explained he had a guilty conscience he couldn't live with his conscience a guilty conscience is a terrible thing there are things in my life as there no doubt will be things in yours of which I'm deeply ashamed whether they be things you and I have done or failed to do or said or failed to say things we've read things we've watched things we've enjoyed things we've thought and my conscience as it were sits on my shoulder and says to me that was wrong that was terrible that was wicked that was impure that was uncaring it was lazy it was neglectful and it then says to me and you can't blame anyone else and you can't blame your circumstances because actually it was your fault and you are entirely to blame you are guilty and that is why we need to know finally how we can have a cleansed conscience because you see the subjective guilt that we feel in our conscience points to a far deeper and far bigger reality which is the objective guilt with which we stand before God on the judgment day in other words it's not just that our consciences make us feel guilty it is that we really are guilty before a holy

God so turn finally will you to Hebrews chapter 9 again to that second reading which we had Hebrews chapter 9 on page 1209 now there are three references to conscience in Hebrews 9 and 10 so I'd love us all to take some homework away and I'd love us all perhaps later on today or this evening or tomorrow morning to read through Hebrews 9 and 10 the whole of Hebrews 9 and 10 we haven't got time to do that now but I'd love us to go away and do that but here are the highlights firstly chapter 9 verses 1 to 10 the Old Testament temple with its priesthood gifts and sacrifices couldn't cleanse the conscience chapter 9 verse 9 according to this arrangement speaking of the Old Testament sacrificial system gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper but deal only with food and drink and various washings regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation the Old

Testament sacrifices couldn't perfect the word means to qualify a sense of being qualified to stand in the presence of God dirty sinful consciences to stand before God they didn't deal with the problem of our guilt before God it's why of course they had to be repeated year after year after year second chapter 9 verses 11 to 14 Jesus has died to deal with our guilt before a holy God and cleanse our consciences verse 12 he entered once for all into the holy places not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood thus securing an eternal redemption notice will you Jesus death was a once for all death not a once for all people death in other words so that everyone regardless of whether or not they trust in him is forgiven no not a once for all people death but a once for all time sacrifice once for all which never needs to be repeated and the result verse 14 how much more will the blood of Christ who through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish to God purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living

God the writer is saying however many good works we have to our name they don't have the power to remove our guilt before God but Jesus bore the penalty for our sin in his body he bore the guilt that is ours and therefore as we trust in Jesus as we trust in his death on the cross our sins are forgiven our guilt is removed and our conscience is cleansed third the result is a wonderful confidence chapter 10 verses 19 to 23 chapter 10 verses 19 to 23 let me read them therefore brothers since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain that is through his flesh and since we have a great high priest over the house of

God let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering for he who promised is faithful notice will you verse 19 if we are trusting in the death of Jesus we have been brought into the presence of God forever it's not something that just happens in church but we live every moment of every day in the presence of God isn't that a wonderful thing if we are trusting in Jesus every moment of every day in the presence of God notice verse 20 the temple curtain the visual aid the separation between us and God if we are trusting in Jesus has been removed notice verse 21 Jesus is our great high priest indeed Jesus is the only priest the new testament ever speaks about church leaders aren't priests church leaders shouldn't be called priests because it's only

[34 : 04] Jesus who through his death brings us into the presence of God and so verse 22 the writer says draw near with full assurance a clean heart and a clean conscience now it may well be that there are some here this morning and I guess in a crowd like this there are bound to be some here this morning and actually you don't know what it is to have a clean conscience you long to but actually you don't and the glorious news is that you can by trusting in Jesus Christ and his death on the cross for our sins and if you've never done that if you've never put trust in Jesus or this is all completely new to you then do talk to a friend here or come talk to me afterwards about how you can do that but what about those of us who are following

Jesus already Hebrews was written after all to Christians it's the Christians that the writer says verse 19 draw near by which he means draw near not just as a one off thing but actually draw near and carry on drawing near again and again day after day what do you say hang on a moment hasn't Jesus brought us into the presence of God once for all by Jesus death on the cross well yes he has so what's the writer saying in verse 19 what he's saying is that we should consciously preach the achievements of Jesus death on the cross to our hearts and consciences so that we enjoy that access to God in the experience of our lives every day perhaps when the devil points his finger at us and stirs up memories of thoughts and things that we've done in the past which are wrong which we know are wrong at which point you say if we're trusting

Jesus Christ we can reply and say with absolute confidence and boldness I am a forgiven person I no longer stand before God as a guilty person my conscience has been cleansed by the blood of Jesus in his excellent book on conscience Christopher Ash writes about a Christian who was visited by his pastor as he lay dying in hospital and his pastor asked him is there anything you need to confess to God before you die he thought and he replied no there is nothing I've done many wrong things I've said all sorts of bad things I've done even more evil things which you know I have nothing to confess I've confessed my sin to

God daily for many years now and repented of every known sin and I've made a habit of trusting each day in the blood of Jesus shed for my sin so thanks for asking but no there is nothing I'm ready to die in fact I've been ready to die for many years now thank God ever since I put my trust in Jesus isn't that a wonderful thing to be able to say the joy the joy the assurance of a cleansed conscience let's spend a few moments in quiet and then I shall lead us in prayer let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience heavenly father we thank you very much for the way in which your word helps us to understand ourselves and we praise you as we look at our own consciences which we so easily suppress which we know are unreliable which we know are guilty we praise you for the death of the

Lord Jesus once for all time such that those who trust in him might have our sin washed away forgiven our consciences cleansed and we pray heavenly father for a deep and real rejoicing and confidence each day conscious of who we are rejoicing in a cleansed conscience and rejoicing too in that future day when we can stand before you as forgiven people and we ask it in Jesus name amen