

The renewed conscience

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 April 2018

Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0:00] Romans chapter 14 verses 1 to 15 on page 1143. As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.

Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls, and he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honour of the Lord.

The one who eats, eats in honour of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honour of the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself.

[1:05] For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God, for it is written, As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God.

So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.

By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. Our second reading is from 1 Corinthians chapter 8, verses 1 to 13, which is on page 1151 of the Church Bibles.

[2:22] 1 Corinthians chapter 8, starting at verse 1. Now concerning food offered to idols, we know that all of us possess knowledge. This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that an idol has no real existence and that there is no God but one.

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 are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

However, not all possess this knowledge, but some, through former association with idols, eat food as rarely offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

[3:47] For if anyone sees you who have knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?

And so by your knowledge, this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus, sinning against your brothers, and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. Nick, thanks very much for reading.

Do please keep 1 Corinthians chapter 8 open, and let me pray for us. Psalm 95. Today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your heart.

Heavenly Father, we thank you very much for this wonderful privilege we have of open Bibles, and being able to hear your voice, read and proclaimed.

[4:57] And we pray, therefore, this morning, please would you grant us soft hearts, hearts that will listen and engage, hearts that we pray under your Holy Spirit will be transformed by your word.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, this is the second of two talks on conscience. The first was before Easter, so if you weren't here three weeks ago, then do please listen to that talk online. We saw briefly that all of us naturally suppress our conscience. We thought about how unreliable our conscience is. We identified the experience of a guilty conscience, and we rejoiced in the possibility of having a cleansed conscience.

And let me plug, once again, Christopher Ash's book. I see there's still one more copy on the bookstore. I'm sure we can order more. Pure Joy. The Joy of Rediscovering Your Conscience, an excellent book.

I was talking to someone this morning who's begun to read it. It is a fantastic book. So what we're going to do today is we're going to ask the question, what does a truly Christian conscience look like?

[6:12] In other words, a conscience that has been cleansed by and washed by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. What does a truly Christian conscience look like? In practice.

It's why I've called this talk the renewed conscience. Because questions of conscience and kind of how I feel about things, and, you know, is this what I feel is the right thing to do or the wrong thing to do, those kinds of questions of conscience affect us every day.

So what do you do if you've been brought up to honor Sunday as a special day of rest, for example, and you find yourself in a church where most people don't?

Or if you think that infant baptism is very important, but you join a church where only adult believers are baptized, or perhaps it's the other way around, and you've been brought up to believe that infant baptism is unbiblical.

Or if you've been brought up not to drink alcohol, and you find yourself with Christians who enjoy a glass of wine or a pint of beer.

[7:22] Or perhaps you're from a culture which doesn't eat pork or doesn't eat meat at all, and you become a follower of Jesus Christ, and yet eating pork or eating meat, it just doesn't feel right.

Or how do you react if you've never watched an 18 film or even a 15 rated film, and you find yourself with Christians who will watch one occasionally? Or how do you just go about the far more common day-to-day business of making decisions where we might feel strongly that something is the right thing to do, or perhaps it's not the right thing to do?

Hence this talk. What does a truly renewed conscience look like? Well, you'll see on the outline there, there are two headings.

Firstly, we're going to think about listening to conscience, and then secondly, we're going to think about training our consciences. So first of all, listening to conscience.

1 Corinthians chapter 8, page 1151, if you've lost it. Now remember from the first talk, the issue in this chapter is the issue of food sacrifice to idols.

[8:35] So most of the meat which you would have bought in Corinth, you wouldn't have gone along to your nearest task to buy it. Rather, it would have been sold in the market, and most of the meat sold in the market would have been sacrificed beforehand to an idol in the temple.

I guess the equivalent today would be halal meat or something like that. And there are some Christians in Corinth, and their consciences are saying, you shouldn't eat that meat because it's

been offered to a pagan god.

Now notice just a couple of things to get our bearings first of all. Firstly, this is not an issue where there's no right answer.

Paul is very clear. There is a right answer. In other words, it's not simply a case of what's right for me or what's right for you. Have a look at 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.

[9:39] What does the Apostle Paul say? Idols are nothing. The gods of ancient Greece and Rome have no real existence outside the minds of their worshippers.

And therefore, of course, to offer meat to an idol like that is empty. It means nothing. So what is the right Bible answer to the question, is it okay to eat meat that's been sacrificed to an idol?

Well, yes. Second, notice it's not an issue where to choose one option or the other is to commit a sin. Where that is the case, the Apostle Paul doesn't say you should just follow your conscience. Instead, he calls out the sin for what it is. So just turn back a page to 1 Corinthians chapter 5, verse 1, where there's a different issue in the church in Corinth, chapter 5, verses 1 and 2.

What's the issue? Verse 1, it's sexual immorality in the church and of the kind that even pagan Corinth finds scam. scandalous.

[10:51] And Paul, notice, doesn't say if your conscience says it's fine, then it's fine. No, verse 2, he calls out the sin for what it is. Rather than boasting, they should mourn and grieve.

So, having got our bearings, whose conscience do I need to listen to? Firstly, I need to listen to my own conscience.

You need to listen to your own conscience. Paul doesn't say to those who are sensitive about eating idol meat, you must eat it. After all, these idols are nothing.

So, you must eat it. Because he knows, verse 7, if they do eat it, their consciences will be defiled. In other words, in their hearts, as they think about what they're doing, in their hearts, they are setting themselves up against what they believe to be the will of God, that they're being disobedient.

In other words, it's very important, says the Apostle Paul, that we never do something that our consciences tell us is wrong, even when our conscience is wrong to say that it's wrong.

[12:11] Okay? Let me just repeat that. We should never do something that our consciences tell us is wrong, even when our conscience is wrong to tell us it's wrong.

Where sin is not at stake, it's vital that I respect my conscience and am led by it. Now, let's think about Anna for a moment.

Anna is fictional, some of her friends from church in their 20s and 30s are going out to a pub one Thursday evening and they invite her to join them.

They're going to have a meal there and they're going to have a drink. And she replies, that's very kind, but I don't think I should come. They ask why. And she explains, well, before I was a Christian, I used to get to the pub a lot.

I usually drank too much and sometimes I did things afterwards and actually I now bitterly regret those things that I did afterwards. And therefore, it doesn't feel right.

[13:19] In fact, ever since I put my trust in Jesus, going to the pub has just never felt right. I'm sorry, I won't come. Oh, come on, they reply, don't be a small sport.

We're not going to drink too much, we're just going to have one drink, we're going to have a meal, it's going to be a great time. Come along and join us. Here's the question. What do you think Anna should do?

The Bible says we shouldn't get drunk, but it doesn't prohibit alcohol. And yet, her conscience tells her not to. Just turn to your neighbour and discuss how you would advise Anna.

Right. Well, I take it that Anna shouldn't go. It's not a sin for her to go to the pub, but it's wrong for her to go if her conscience tells her it's wrong.

But notice, in that scenario, it's not just Anna who needs to listen to her conscience. Because secondly, we need to listen to the conscience of other believers.

[14:26] In other words, not just our own consciences, but the consciences of others. Those in Corinth who know their Bibles and pride themselves in having the right answers, Paul says, but hang on a moment, not everyone is like you.

Verse 7, not all possess this knowledge, and it could lead to spiritual disaster. Have a look at verse 9. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who has knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged if his conscience is weak to eat food offered to idols? And so, by your knowledge, this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.

Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat lest I make my brother stumble.

It's important that we listen to the consciences of other Christians. By pressurizing the weaker Christian brother or sister into doing something which they believe to be wrong, you could push them down a path which ultimately could lead to their destruction and take them away from Jesus.

[15:45] So for Anna, for example, over time, it could lead to her drifting back to her previous lifestyle and moving away from Christ. So you see, where does that leave the friends who invited Anna to the pub in the first place?

Well, they need to make it easy, don't they, for Anna to obey her conscience rather than calling her a spoiled sport. And instead, perhaps to suggest an alternative.

Let's get a takeaway instead. Let's go to Pizza Express. Thirdly, we need to listen to the conscience of unbelievers and I'm not going to say anything about this at all, so this is the homework.

So the homework is to look at 1 Corinthians 10 verses 23 to 33 to see what the Apostle Paul says about respecting the conscience of those around us who are not yet followers of Jesus.

So, so far, listening to conscience, we're to listen to our own conscience, we're to listen to the conscience of others. Now, turn back, will you, to Romans chapter 14 to that other passage which we had.

[17:00] We'll spend less time here but I just want us to see that actually we have exactly the same principles in Romans chapter 14, the same dynamic as we have in 1 Corinthians.

notice the two issues in the chapter. The first is in verse 2 where some in the church in Rome think it's okay to eat anything, others think you shouldn't eat meat at all.

And the other issue is verse 5, whether or not you should make one day a week into a special Sabbath day. Once again, notice it's an issue where there is a biblically right answer.

Verse 14, I know and am persuaded in the Lord that nothing is unclean in itself. Verse 20, everything is indeed clean. Now, Paul knows this because of what the Lord Jesus himself taught about all foods being clean.

And therefore, although the consciences of the Christians in Rome varied in their conclusions, not all of them were right in terms of what their consciences were saying.

[18:10] Some were right. Those who said you can eat anything because all foods are clean, they're right. The others are wrong. But notice how Paul goes on in verse 14, but it is unclean to anyone who thinks it is unclean.

You get a similar thing in verse 23. Whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

In other words, you need to listen to your conscience. You need to obey your conscience. The Puritan pastor Richard Baxter wrote this.

I put it on the outline. I think it's a helpful quote. If you forsake conscience and go against it, you reject the authority of God in doing that which you think he forbids you.

Can you see what he's saying? If you reject your conscience, you are setting your heart against God, against what you believe to be right.

[19:24] We need to listen to our own consciences. And we need to listen to the conscience of other Christians. verse 10. Why do you pass judgment on your brother?

Or why do you despise your brother? Presumably those who are right and know that they can eat anything, presumably they're looking down on those who don't.

It's repeated in verse 13. Therefore, let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.

In short, says Paul, it's all about love. Verse 15. If your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love.

We are to listen to the voice of conscience, that of others and our own. But, and it's a big but.

[20:23] If you and I are going to listen to our conscience, then it needs to be a conscience that is trained. A trained conscience. Which brings us to our second point.

Because I wonder if you noticed how careful is, how careful the Apostle Paul is in both churches, in both Rome and in Corinth. How careful he is to give them clear teaching and clear instructions.

Just flick on again to 1 Corinthians chapter 8. As he says, 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.

And he doesn't stop there. He goes on in verses 5 and 6 to unpack what he said because he wants their minds and their consciences to be trained to be trained by God's truth.

And he does the same in Romans 14. He teaches them. In other words, presumably he hopes that in both churches this teaching will gradually take root. He's not sort of anticipating a permanent standoff, if you like, between these people who hold different views.

[21:38] Nor is he saying that both sides should simply agree to differ or to meet in the middle or to bury their differences in some process of good disagreement.

Nor does he want these churches to be ruled by what we might call the tyranny of a weak conscience. And that happens, of course, when people cling wrongly to their consciences and do so so strongly that actually they are incapable of being taught and learning anything else.

Or they say, you mustn't trouble and disturb my conscience. At which point their conscience becomes unteachable and they then end up making their conscience rather than the Bible their ultimate authority.

Instead, Paul longs for their unreliable consciences to be deliberately brought under and subject to the reliable word of God.

That, if you like, is how the Holy Spirit will recalibrate their consciences through God's word just as you might recalibrate some technical scientific instrument or perhaps on an old computer monitor you've had to recalibrate the colour on it to get the display right.

[23:04] And that is why Paul spells out very clearly both in 1 Corinthians 8 and in Romans 14 precisely what God teaches. So those who haven't fully grasped what God teaches do so and their consciences are trained and recalibrated by it.

In the hope, no doubt, that the time will come both in Corinth and in Rome where everyone in those churches will be able to sit down happily together, gladly together and eat anything whether it's been sacrificed to an idol or not and whether it's meat or not.

In his book Christopher Ash tells the story of a well-known painter who used to keep next to his painting table and easel and everything on a shelf he used to keep a number of coloured stones, precious stones, emeralds, rubies, sapphire and so on.

And on one occasion he was asked why. And he replied all day long as I work at my canvas I'm doing so with mixed impure colours and my eye is out to lose its keenness.

So what I do every now and then as I'm painting I take my eye off the canvas and instead I feast my eye on those pure stones to recalibrate my sense of colour.

[24:32] And that is what you and I need to be doing with our consciences to have our conscience recalibrated by the reliable trustworthy spirit inspired word of God.

Now you say what is that going to look like? Well I think a good starting point here is to be honest with ourselves. In other words there will be two sorts of people in this room.

Some of us will have overly tender overly sensitive consciences others will have underly sensitive consciences.

Those with oversensitive consciences perhaps you're brought up in a legalistic background of some sort whether at school or at home or perhaps you're just someone who worries and you're always worrying you're always concerned to be doing the right thing and your conscience is rather like a sort of compass in a magnet shop and it's just going all over the place the whole time.

And I take it if that is you then as your conscience is recalibrated by God's word then I take it that actually you will discover the wonderful freedom of the gospel.

[25:49] The wonderful freedom of living with Jesus Lord free from endless religious rules and regulations and rejoicing in and delighting in the forgiveness that Jesus brings.

Whereas others and I suspect this is probably the majority of us and I include myself in this we will have undersensitive consciences.

Perhaps we've been shaped by the culture in which we live and we no longer really give much thought to what our conscience is saying. And as the Holy Spirit recalibrates our consciences while we will find ourselves listening to conscience more both our own consciences and the consciences of others.

Now the actual process of training our conscience happens clearly as we soak ourselves in scripture as we meditate upon it as we chew over it as we think it through as we pray it through both on our own and with others such that God's word then shapes our whole character such that we're the kind of people who end up making wise godly decisions such that we can see what the bible says over here such that we can see an issue or a decision or a problem over on this side and actually we can bring the bible to bear as we make decisions.

Whereas a conscience that hasn't been trained like that is inevitably a conscience which is just going to drift and it's just going to drift with a muddiness and moral confusion of the world in which we live.

[27:36] Now Glenn Harrison has a good illustration of this in his book A Better Story. It's a book on why it is that Christians have a better story to tell when it comes to sex and relationships.

A better story to tell than the world around us. And he says this imagine for a moment a grandmother in her mid-seventies and all her life she has harbored a prejudice towards gay people and she sees no reason to change her mind now.

Her guts if you like tell her what she believes and you can see it in her face as she wrinkles up her nose at any reference to gay relationships in her favourite soap opera.

Until one day her favourite grandson comes out as being gay and her views begin to change. He's a lovely boy she reasons.

He's been bullied at school and so she is going to give him all the love and support that she can. Even more surprisingly perhaps she begins to advocate for the rights and freedoms of LGBT people.

[28:45] After all she says doesn't everyone deserve to be happy? Now here's the question that Glenn Harrison poses. He says what has happened to the deeply held convictions that informed grandma's conscience?

Well they were just the product of her culture. She'd been brought up in a completely different era and now the culture's changed. She comes face to face with that changed culture in the person of her grandson and in no time at all her conscience does a complete 180 degree U-turn.

Now I think we can apply that same principle to any issue but it illustrates and demonstrates the need for a conscience that is shaped by not the culture we live in not the air that you and I breathe every day but by the Bible and a trained conscience like that that's being constantly calibrated with the teaching of the Bible a trained conscience like that is a great blessing.

It's a blessing to ourselves personally it's a blessing to others at church at Grace Church it's a blessing to those we live with to those we're at school with to those in our families because you see a trained conscience acts rather like a boat that's attached to an anchor and as the boat drifts away when the boat drifts away the anchor keeps on pulling it back to the Lord Jesus.

So here's the question I've been thinking myself and I think it's a good question for all of us to ask am I open to my conscience being recalibrated and trained by what God says by his spirit in the Bible or is my conscience set in stone if you like and unwilling to change regardless of what the Bible has to say this is what I've always believed and I'm not going to change my mind now am I actively seeking to bring my conscience in line with God's teaching and priorities because that is

what a truly renewed conscience looks like and actually it's a conscience like that that is a conscience that is truly worth listening to for if your brother is grieved by what you eat you are no longer walking in love heavenly father we want to praise you for the extraordinary way in which you have made us thank you for the consciences which you have put deep within each one of us and thank you for helping us to see this morning the great power of our consciences both for good and for ill and we pray therefore please would you help each one of us for our consciences to be trained for us to be humble teachable and we pray that we'd be willing to submit ourselves to your word and know the joy and freedom of that and to listen then to our own trained consciences and those of others and we ask it in Jesus name

[32 : 29] Amen