

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (30-7-2000 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Acts 24:1-21

Conscience clear before God and man

### Introduction

Following Paul's defence on the steps of the Castle of Antonio, the meeting broke up in disorder, with the Pharisees siding with Paul about the resurrection from the dead, opposed to the Sadducees who denied the resurrection, angels and spirits. The Lord encouraged Paul, telling him he would testify about Him in Rome itself, as he had done in Jerusalem (Acts 23:11).

Paul's nephew overheard a Jewish plot to murder Paul, and so Paul was escorted by 470 soldiers at 9p.m., and taken 60 miles from Jerusalem to Caesarea. Then before the Roman governor, Felix, the Jewish priests brought charges via Tertullus, accusing him of sedition against the state, being the ringleader of the Christians, and profaning the Temple. They attempted to poison the minds of the Romans against Paul as a danger to the peace. Paul courteously addressed Felix, denied he was a troublemaker or a revolutionary. His enemies could provide no proof anyway. Paul confessed he was a Christian because he believed that in Christ, the Old Testament scriptures had been fulfilled. He also believed in the resurrection of the just and the unjust. His aim in living was to have a conscience void of offence towards God and man.

We are going to look at the subject of conscience. We all have got one, and it disturbs us at times. It can be misused at times. Yet it is controlled by God and it has an important function to play in the living of the Christian life.

### The conscience and its functioning

From our earliest days we are aware of that little voice inside. It helps us make up our minds about right and wrong. It approves of good. It disapproves of evil. It impels us to do right. It reproves us when we do wrong. It asserts its authority to rule and control our lives. It demands to be heard. It is not easily silenced.

The power of conscience is revealed in Scripture. Joseph's brothers were convicted by conscience, years after selling Joseph and pretending to his father that he was dead (Genesis 42:21). King Darius was unable to sleep or eat after he had Daniel put in the lion's den (Daniel 6:18). Judas knew he had done wrong in betraying Jesus, and tried to return the money he had been paid. **"I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood."** (Matthew 27:4), and he went and committed suicide.

When we go against our conscience, we are full of remorse, have a sense of condemnation, and feelings of God's judgement on us. Conscience is built into every man's being; it does not begin at conversion. Paul says even the heathen, without the Old Testament law, have an awareness of God's will and their conscience accuses or excuses them (Romans 2:14,15). The conscience is the arbiter in every man and when violated, there is sin committed against the Creator, and the person damages himself, Christian or non-Christian.

Yet we must not go too far on the other side. We must not make too many claims for it. It is not necessarily God's voice, though God can speak through it. Furthermore, it is not infallible, for it can make mistakes and is not always accurate. Scripture speaks of having an evil conscience (Hebrews 10:22), a defiled or corrupted conscience (Titus 1:15), a seared conscience – seared as with a hot iron (1 Timothy 4:2), and malfunctions can break conscience (1 Corinthians 8:7). E.g. Hindus throw children into the river to please the river goddess; people like Paul persecuted, imprisoned, burnt or murdered believers thinking they were doing the right thing. Jesus warned, **A time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God** (John 16:2). Christians have kept slaves, buying and selling them like cattle, ill-treating them, believing they were right to do that. There is the story of the Spanish bandit who slit his victims throats from ear to ear without any problem – but had a terrible attack of conscience because on one occasion he made the mistake of eating meat on a Friday. Likewise the Mohammedon who cut his enemies throats without difficulty, but whose conscience was greatly disturbed because a drop of water past his lips during the fast of Ramadan.

It is possible to have a morbid and over-scrupulous conscience, digging up the past, torturing selves with the failures of the past, brooding over things that God has promised are forgiven and forgotten. When conscience is unreliable, we lead others astray. The story is told of a shipwreck for which there was no apparent reason until examination of the ship's compass. Someone had cleaned it with a penknife, and the point had broken off. The metal point had remained in the instrument, and so had deflected the compass thereafter.

#### Education of conscience needed

If the conscience is to function right, especially if it has been defiled, scarred or is morbid, several things need to happen.

- (1) It needs to be cleansed. This is one of the effects of Christ's death on the Cross. **Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience** (Hebrews 10:22). We can come to God in prayer and worship Him as His people – and to do so we need consciousness of sins forgiven, that there is nothing between us, no unconfessed sin. And this is only possible because of Christ's atoning death. The blood was sprinkled for cleansing (Leviticus 8:30). The way into His presence was opened by the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:20). We cannot draw near to God apart from cleansing. Confession and dependence on Christ's death should be an important feature of our prayers. Maybe, if prayer seems unreal, if God seems afar off, if we feel no liberty, it is because our conscience is not clear, through the blood of Jesus.
- (2) The work of the Holy Spirit in new birth. One of the effects of the Holy Spirit in new birth is that the conscience is quickened. We have new standards. E.g. in our daily work we become more thorough, conscientious, checking the job is done properly. We have a sharper sense of sin and failure. Zaccheus had never spoken like this before he met Christ: **if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount** (Luke 19:8). Consider some of the social effects of Revival – slavery abolished, care for the helpless, poor and neglected. Sangster's list of effects of Revival included the repaying

of old debts, reduction of immorality, cut in divorce rate, reduction in crime rate, improved quality of work, peace and happiness.

- (3) The teaching of the word of Scripture. As we read the Word or hear it preached, God addresses the conscience. It triggers something in the mind and can throw light on something that hasn't actually been mentioned. People keep criticizing the Bible because it keeps criticizing them. God's standards and God's will challenge us to make readjustments, changes, to come more under Christ's Lordship. Neglecting the Word leads to backsliding.

So the conscience that is adrift, faulty, unreliable and not functioning properly needs to be cleansed, it needs to come under the Holy Spirit's control and then be educated through the Word. The result will be mature adult Christians, strong and confident in the Lord, people whom God can use. The more we keep giving in to the Lord, the more we grow.

### Practical obedience to conscience

**I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man** (Acts 24:16) – note that it involved striving – Paul took pains over it, worked hard at it. He had to practice severe self-discipline. **My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me** (1 Corinthians 4:4). **Holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith** (1 Timothy 1:19).

We must quickly obey the voice of conscience when God has spoken clearly and unmistakably. Obedience may be costly and painful, but if we are to walk with the Lord closely and become mature, it is essential. If we delay and argue and put it off, we are on the road to spiritual defeat and disaster. An Indian in N.W. Canada once described conscience like this: a three cornered piece of tin in the heart. When it turns round it hurts. But if it is not listened to, bye and bye the corners wear off and it does not hurt anymore.

Those with seared or defiled consciences are those who once were troubled by conscience, but hear it no longer. God's voice no longer is within calling distance. A Christian leader of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century lost touch with God and His cause, because he was seduced by a woman who was not his wife. Queen Anne challenged him when she addressed him at court, saying, "Does God speak to you as he used to?" He hung his head in shame and said nothing. God's voice was indeed faint now.

How loud and clear do you hear God's voice, or is it very faint? Are you no longer hearing His call to come to Him, are you able to ignore His challenge to your giving, your prayer life, that relationship with a certain friend? Is God's will no longer first in your life? Have you made excuses and rationalized the situation away? God says, "Be right and honest with me – whatever the cost." Always give God the benefit of the doubt. If something is doubtful – it is probably wrong. A useful guide: "Whatever impairs reason, hardens conscience, clouds sense of God, spoils relish for spiritual things – that to me is sin." Keep short accounts with God. Rule up the ledger every night. Put your head on the pillow with your heart right with God. **If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness** (1 John 1:9). Here is the secret of peace and joy and strength.

## Conclusion

Can we look God and man in the face with a clear conscience? Has everything been put right? **“Do whatever he tells you”** (John 2:5).