

A Stained Conscience

We live in the time of the smart phone and self-driving cars and artificial intelligence and apps for almost every conceivable thing. What do animal sacrifices have to do with us? We have companies like apple and google and amazon that help make life better for us. Who cares about a high priest?

And also, we have more relative freedom than any other people has ever had - freedom to travel and see the world. Freedom to start a business. Freedom to buy what we want and do what we want. How does a text like this help us experience freedom that we don't already have? What relevance does it have for us? Well, some might say, "none". That would be wrong.

But for all the advances we have - medical and technological that solve so many problems and make life better in so many ways... and for all the relative, but real freedoms we enjoy today... these things cannot touch what we need most. They cannot solve our most fundamental dilemma. And this is true whether you lived at the time of the first century when this was written or today. Whether you are male, female, young, old, poor or rich. Whether you live in an advanced country like America or a third world country in southeast Africa.

What is that dilemma? What problem do we need solved? How do people with a stained conscience relate with God? That's what this passage is about. We are made for God, and yet our conscience condemns us and makes us feel unacceptable to God and leaves us alienated from God. I wonder how many here are thinking, "*Oh, what I wouldn't give for a deep and real sense of God's full acceptance. What I wouldn't give to know that I am His and He is mine. What I wouldn't give to know the felt love and grace of God.*" The defiled conscience stands in the way.

It's important we understand what the conscience is. The word conscience is made up of two words. Science or the "knowledge of something" and the prefix "con" which means self. Internal or self knowledge - of right and wrong, good and evil. It is something that God has put in every single person. Romans 2 says that even Gentiles (non Jews) who did not receive the law have a conscience that either accuses or excuses them.

Richard Sibbes, a 17th century pastor in England pictured the conscience as "*God's court within us*", with a recorder (the conscience records what we have done), witnesses (the conscience witnesses what we've done), an accuser (the conscience accuses or excuses us - Romans 2), and a judge (the conscience passes judgment on what we have done or not done).

And this is crucial because it has to do with how we relate with God. How we live before God. **BIG IDEA: And the aim of this text (we see in verse 14) is that we would have a clean conscience in order to live before God and serve Him in a way that pleases Him.** The word serve could be translated

worship. The idea is drawing near to God to worship and serve him. Not just sing songs (which is included), but all of life that we live before the face of God.

Now human beings have set out to deal with the problem of a stained conscience in a number of different ways. The author is writing to Jewish Christians tempted to go back to Judaism, so he is addressing that route.

The Old Covenant could not cleanse the conscience

The author wants them to know, there is nothing to go back to. The priests with their daily rituals and washings, and the high priest with his once a year blood sacrifice on the day of atonement could not solve the problem of a condemned conscience before God. The old covenant was severely limited. Limited in its access to God and limited in its effectiveness to deal with sin. Access - verse 7 says one person once a year. Effect - verse 7 says for the day of atonement blood sacrifice was only for “unintentional” sins. So the conclusion we see in verses 9-10 is that all this could not perfect the conscience before God. It could not give relief and confidence before God. It could not give access to God. In other words, the author saying, there is nothing for these Christians to go back to. It is a dead end. The Old Covenant could not clean the stained conscience.

And none of our lame attempts will either. Probably nobody is tempted to try an old covenant sacrificial system to appease our consciences. But we have other ways of trying to do it. I thought of a few ways we try to solve the problem of a polluted conscience.

Our lame attempts at dealing with an unclean conscience

1) Make excuses - blame shifting (blaming other people, circumstances, obstacle/impediment/handicap)... only ends in digging such a deep and narrow hole where only you can fit in it, having blamed everyone and everything else for the things your conscience accuses you of.

2) We overrule it - by trying to convince people that evil is good, darkness is light, etc. This is when one seeks to make sin virtuous. An obvious example... and one of the most despicable things I have seen was the “Shout Your Abortion” social media campaign, where women got on FB, Twitter, Instagram and bragged about having an abortion.

Why would they do that? The scripture says that God hates the shedding of innocent blood. And their conscience tells them that. So why? Only one of two reasons. Either their conscience is absolutely seared by going against it for so long and with such violence, that they feel nothing. Or their conscience is so heavy and painful that they need to turn their vice into a virtue... and try to get others to celebrate it with them. It doesn't work. Trying to overrule the conscience cannot solve the problem, and ultimately will end in the searing of it.

3) We silence it - entertainment - every waking moment, consciously or subconsciously muting the conscience. Neil Postman, "Amusing ourselves to death..." written in 1985. Where are we 35 years later? Much further down the road. Silencing the conscience doesn't work.

4) We suppress it - The conscience is suppressed through self esteem, and self-flattery. Rather than hearing the word of God and his diagnosis of us. We turn to self-help gurus (even supposed Christian ones) who tell us we really are good people and we just need to have a positive self-image. But it is not a negative self image our conscience needs to be purified from, but from "dead works" (verse 14). Sinful actions. Suppressing the conscience may succeed to a short time, but ends in disillusionment.

5) We try harder. We think that through human effort and trying harder, we can appease the conscience. It doesn't work. This may work for a short time, but ends in burnout.

And when we seek to solve the problem of a stained conscience in these ways, it keeps us from honestly walking with God in reality. It keeps us from God himself. *Remember, the aim of a cleansed conscience is to serve and worship God.*

The blood of Christ

There is only one thing that can answer decisively our accusing, stained conscience. Only one thing can cleanse the conscience... the blood of Christ. Nothing but the blood. Only through the blood of Jesus can we be ruthlessly honest, face down our conscience AND draw near with confidence to God!! Nothing but the blood of Christ can do this!

Only when we turn away from all other inadequate measures and dead ends and turn to the one way to have our conscience purified through the blood of Christ, will we be free to "serve and worship the living God". Verses 11-14 are awesome! They show us what God has done in Christ to help us. **In verses 11-12, we see the completeness or finality of Christ's death for us:**

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.

The key phrase is "once for all" (talk with Julia - Catholic). This is in comparison with the old covenant practices. Daily washings and sacrifices by the priests and the yearly day of atonement blood sacrifice by the high priest. Jesus' cross work is once for all. The Father is satisfied with his work once for all. Jesus entered into the presence of God for us, once for all. He has secured our eternal redemption once for all. It is done. **In verses 13-14, we see the sufficiency of Christ's death for us:**

For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, 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.

The author argues from the lesser to the greater. If the blood offerings under the old covenant could make someone clean in a ceremonial way, how much more can the blood of Christ do? The old covenant sacrifices had ceremonial power. The greater sacrifice of Christ can take away guilt from the conscience. His death is fully loaded, completely sufficient.

And all of this -- the completeness of Christ's death and the sufficiency of Christ's death -- is to purify your conscience ***in order to serve the living God.***

But how does this work? By looking to Christ and the completeness of his death and the sufficiency of his death and decidedly not looking to *anything* else. And not looking to "things" he gives us, but to Christ himself. He is my acceptance, my cleansing, my righteousness, my peace, my life, my redemption. We sang it earlier.

What can wash away my sin... what can make me whole again. Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Nothing can for sin atone, not of good that I have done. Nothing but the blood of Jesus. This is all my hope and peace. This is all my righteousness. Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

The blood of Christ does all of this for me? Jesus **IS** all of this for me? When you come to God this way - trusting in Christ's blood which accomplished full access to God once for all, and full and deep cleansing for your conscience, your heart will want to serve him. You will want to worship him. Not because you should or have to, but because you want to from a heart that loves him.

So we do not serve in order to get a clean conscience. We get a clean conscience through the blood of Jesus in order to serve the living God. Wouldn't it be great to live here? I want to leave you with eight things to put into practice in **2020**. We are close to the beginning of a new year where you will be thinking about resolutions, so what great time to think about how you are going to boast in the blood of Jesus this year (Galatians 6:14):

Boasting in His Precious Blood in 2020

1. When you rise, look to the mercy of God in the blood of Jesus. In the morning, give me Jesus. You look to Christ and say, "Today Jesus you are all my righteousness, hope, and peace. You are my acceptance with God the Father."

2. For every look at self, take 10 looks to Christ. One of the shortest ways to get off track is to start looking at ourselves - either in self-admiration, self adulation, and pride or to despair and guilt. Do things that help to remind you to look to Christ. Make notes to yourself.
3. When your conscience accuses you because of sin, make a bee line to Jesus and claim his blood. Don't run from, but run to Jesus. 1 John 2:1 (Advocate).
4. When the accuser throws his arrows at you, accusing you of real or imagined sins, past or present failures, respond like Luther who said:

So when the devil throws your sins in your face and declares that you deserve death and hell, tell him this: "I admit that I deserve death and hell, what of it? For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction on my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, Son of God, and where He is there I shall be also!"

Better yet, respond like Paul (Romans 8).

5. When you pray, consciously draw near to God the Father through Jesus, looking to and trusting in the sufficiency of his blood ALONE as your back stage pass into God's presence. Hebrews 4.
6. Faithfully come to worship each week, drawing near to God with the church, celebrating the blood of Jesus and our full and free acceptance with God through it. Let your life in Christ join with others, cascading into a mighty waterfall of joy and grace - for the glory of God and the good of each other.
7. Do all you do, in the name of The Lord Jesus - in other words, in reliance upon Jesus' Blood and finished work, and your acceptance with God through Him. whether office work or child-rearing, school or recreation (Colossians 3:17). 17th Century Puritan, John Owen said, "*all obedience must be laid on the foundation of free pardon in the blood of Christ.*"
8. Ask the Lord for opportunities to gossip about the blood and cross of Christ to others. Ask him for opportunities to bring more people out of bondage to a defiled, stained conscience, and into the life, freedom, and joy of serving and worshipping God with a clean conscience.

Nothing but the blood. Christ's blood cleanses our conscience from guilt and condemnation to serve and worship God with joy and peace and hope and passion! No better way to live.