

BON AIR BAPTIST CHURCH
Rev. James Pardue, Pastor

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Scripture: I Timothy 1:5, 18 and 19; 4:1 and 2

Creating a Christian Conscience

Some people take in stray cats. I take in books. Several years ago my wife reminded me that the structure on Kenmore Road was not the public library. It was our house. So whenever I bring in a book, she will say something like, "Is that a book?" So I have begun to find all kinds of excuses like people who bring home stray cats find excuses. Like, it followed me home. You can trust people at the book store any more. They'll just throw things in your sack. I am reading it for the church library, so that they will know whether they want to buy it or not. I am buying it for our grandkids. She doesn't believe any of it anymore. The other day I did bring home another book. It was fascinating when I saw the title. It was *Make a Life, Not Just a Living*. It was written by Ron Jenson who is one of the best known writers in America in managerial and business affairs. In it he said, "In my years of study as I have talked to people about how to make a success in life, I have come to the conclusion that there are really ten principles that are kind of irreducible, non-negotiable. If you don't have these, you really are not going to make it. I have been able to put them in three categories. The first category has to do with the commitments of your life. The second category has to do with the beliefs in your life, and the third category has to do with the attitudes of your life."

The reason I found that so strange is that I have been reading in the Book of I Timothy about what Paul said was the goal of all religion. He said that the goal of keeping the commands of God is that it would produce inside of you love. Commands are not given so that you can say I have checked out all of them and I have kept them, but so that they would produce inside of you these great qualities of life. In I Timothy, Chapter 1, beginning in verse 5, he says:

The goal of all the commandments is love, which comes from a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith.

I was aware that Ron Jenson had come to exactly the same conclusion that the Apostle Paul did. I want to talk with you this morning about one part of that; that is, about developing a good conscience, developing a Christian conscience. Let me just keep on reading a little bit in the Book of I Timothy, verse 18:

Timothy, my son, I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that my following them you may fight the good fight, hold onto the faith, and a good conscience.

Then he talked about conscience again in Chapter 4:

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.

One of the things that make us essentially human is that we have a conscience. Conscience is God's gift to us so that we can determine what is right and what is wrong. Woodsworth said on one occasion, "I get so sick and tired of humans always talking about right or wrong. Why can't we be just like the animals of the field who never think about such things?" Well, the answer to the question is that the reason we think about such things is that we are not animals of the field. When God made us, he made us with this inter-guidance system that has the ability to say if you follow what is right, you feel better. If you do what is wrong, you feel guilty. Conscience, the word, means to know with. What you are able to do is to stand outside of yourself, look back at your actions, and determine whether it is right or whether it is wrong. What Paul was saying to us is if God gave you the conscience to determine right or wrong, it is absolutely essential that you have a healthy conscience. If your guidance system is all messed up on the inside, then you don't know which direction to go and how to make the determinations of life. The Bible actually begins to say that there are some ways in which your conscience becomes unhealthy. One of them, it says, is that you can have a weak conscience. A weak conscience means that you will focus in on the externals and miss the internals. You will deal with that which is not very important and miss what is very important. You can actually get hurt on the inside about something that really doesn't matter, and you can ignore things that are very important.

The Bible says you can also have a good corrupt conscience. What that means is that one day it will work pretty good. The next time it doesn't work at all. Sometimes you will make the right choices, and then you are opening up the door, you realize you are not making the right choices at all. Sometimes in our life, the Bible says, we can have a guilty conscience. I meet people all the time who tell me you know, I have done things that are wrong. Instead of finding release from that, they remember things that they have done 30 years and 40 years ago, and have never been able to find any relief in their life. The Bible says you can even have an evil conscience; that is, you think you are doing right, but you are just dead wrong. Then the Bible says you can have a seared conscience. A seared conscience means that you have so destroyed it and mutilated it, that it just doesn't operate any more. Those are the people in law enforcement will come and say he looked you in the eye, he shot him, and didn't blink an eye. This whole gift of God on the inside is gone. You can do what you want to and it doesn't bother you at all. What worries me whenever I know what conscience is meant to be and I see how we violate it and misuse it and twist it, and what we end up becoming, how important it is that you and I know how to develop a healthy, good, Christian conscience because if we don't the guidance system that God has given us is not going to be in good stead.

So let me tell you how you can develop what God meant for you to have, which is a healthy, good, Christian conscience. The first thing that is important is that you have to come to the point where you accept personal responsibility. One of the famous preaches in the United States is a Californian named John McArthur. John McArthur has written kind of a classic book about conscience called *The Vanishing Conscience*. What he said was that years ago in America people used to say this is right and this is wrong. They really were concerned about it. He said now right and wrong is people think pretty much up to the individual. If I say something in your life is wrong, you will turn to me and raise your shackles and say who are you to tell me what is right or what is wrong. So he says what has happened is conscience is beginning to fade out of the picture. One of the things that we want to do very much in our life is that we want to get rid of this whole business of guilt. We don't really want to talk about it any more. Let me read you a couple of statements that he made in his classic book. One of them had to do with a man several years ago who wrote a best seller. It was *Your Erroneous Zone* by Dr Wayne Dyer. Listen to what Dr. Dyer said in 1976. "Guilt is one of the most useless of all behaviors, and it needs to be exterminated, sprint cleaned, and sterilized forever." Listen to Ann Landers:

"One of the most painful, self-mutilating times and enemy causing exercises in the human experience is guilt. Remember guilt is the pollutant and we don't need it any more." You and I have entered into a strange society where we are encouraged to sin. Then we want to do away with guilt that comes as a result of it.

.....sue the New York Subway System. The guard should not have shot me. The jury agreed and awarded him 4.8 million dollars. The old man that he attacked is still going to hospitals everyday and paying his life savings. The man who robbed him and helped to bring about his death earlier is now a multi-millionaire because it wasn't his fault somebody shot him. One man in Philadelphia walked in and robbed a store, armed robbery. As he walked out, the store owner pulled out a gun and shot him. He sued. They shouldn't have shot him. That's what the jury said. They let him go, awarded him a million dollars. He was arrested two months later, robbing another store in a wheelchair. One of the class action suits brought against McDonalds recently was that one man went in and said, "You want me to sit on this narrow benches." He had (how can I say it politely?)--what he sat down on was too big. They sued McDonalds and said you ought to know that some of us have big things that we sit on. It is interesting that the judge did throw that out and say that the company is not responsible for how big what you sit on is when you come in to sit down.

But everybody says it's always somebody else's fault. Now as you know, we grow up in a society where everybody is saying well, it is really not my fault, it is really somebody else's. I think that the classic that all of the lawyers in the room is the San Francisco supervisor who shot another supervisor, killed also the mayor San Francisco. He was brought to trial and his defense was that he did it because he ate too much junk food, and especially Hostess Twinkies. So all the lawyers now know this is the "Twinkie defense." It's really not my fault. It is the Hostess Twinkies.

In a culture McArthur says that everybody can do what is wrong but the problem really is, it's really not me. It is really somebody else fault. Please understand that conscience makes me accountable. Conscience says you are responsible. Conscience says you have violated what God wants you to do, but if I want to spend all of my time blaming somebody else or blaming society, then I'll never get to the point where I will be able to be responsible for myself. The first thing in building a good conscience is you have to confess your sins. You have to be willing to turn from your sins. You have to be willing to say it ain't my brother, it ain't my sister, but it is me, O, Lord, standing in the need of prayer. I am the one who did it, and I can only develop my conscience when I turn and look in the mirror and say I am the one who has to give an answer.

In 1984 one of the planes of the National Airlines of Spain ran into a mountain in southern Spain. Eighty-four people were killed. When they recovered that little black box that tells you about the flight data, they listened very carefully as in Spanish and in English these words came to the pilot, "Pull up, pull up, pull up." The last thing on the black box was this: "Shut up, gringo," and he turned off that system and ran into a mountain. If you shut off the system, if you say it is somebody else, it's society's fault, not mine, you are going to run into a mountain, and you are going to be destroyed.

The second thing that is a part of developing a Christian conscience--good conscience, healthy conscience, is that you have to know what the standards are. You have to know the standards that God has given us. Now the Bible says that as I begin to look at the scripture, this becomes the guide that I know here are the standards that God has given. There is a statement that comes out of antiquity that says this: you never know what a crooked line is until you have a straight line to put beside it. Only when you have something to measure do you know when you are crooked. Now if you don't have a standard, then you can make up anything. But if you know what the rules are, if you know what God has said, if you know the commandments, then you can look at them and say, oh, now I know there is something crooked in my life.

There is a beautiful story about the team that went with us to Tanzania. One of the ladies who is going to sing in a few moments was helping the children to learn a musical. They had only a few days. So what she did was that she produced a tape on which she sang on it, and she sent it to all the kids. All the kids listened before they ever came to the meeting so that they had heard about it. They listened to it, and then she said now we will be able to do it. She told me that in that meeting they were listening one day. As she was singing, one of the little kids raised her hand. She said you don't sound like that on the tape. She turned and said oh, yes, I do. No, you are not doing like the lady on the tape. Oh, yes, I am. You see, I am the lady on the tape. God says you may think everything is up for grabs and you can determine right or wrong, but you see I wrote the tape. It is my voice that is on the tape. What you are going to have to determine is whether you are going to listen to yourself, whether you are going to listen to society, or whether you are going to come and listen to God. Until you come to know the standards, then you will never know how to judge it.

Let me quickly tell you the last one. What you have to do then is to be able to develop some practical ways to be able to keep your conscience healthy. Let me give them to you quickly. The first one is you have to sit down and think about it. Listen to what the scripture says: Upon your lull, I meditate day and night. It means that you have got to get serious about listening to what God's voice is on the inside, so you have got to be able to sit down and determine am I, God, on course? Am I trying to do what you want me to do? Acts 24, Paul says it this way. I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and before people. Unless you work on it and meditate on it, you will never get to the point where you can be honest with your conscience.

Second thing, you have got to keep confessed up to date; that is, when God says something is right, then affirm it. When God says something is wrong, then what I need to do is I need to determine I am going to get that straight. I went into a man's house one day who was a bachelor. I don't usually pay attention to people's house and whether they keep house or not, but this one you couldn't miss. He just lived in one big room. When you looked under his bed and you saw boxes of cereal that were half open and half closed and there was some dust and dirt and dirty dishes and everything. I wanted to go to him one day and say could I help you. Maybe we could just get a pickup truck and clean out a little bit. I have often thought about that man. I know a lot of folk like that when I look in their mind. They have all kind of clutter and junk and stuff they never have dealt with. I feel like I want to go to them sometime and say can I get a spiritual pickup truck and let's just clean out some stuff. Unless you clean it out, unless you keep confessing--a friend of mine says I try to keep confessed up to date. I keep trying to understand what is wrong and I try to deal with it as I can.

Third thing--I need to come to understand that I am accountable to somebody else. I have a group of people that I am accountable to. I made that decision years ago that everywhere I would live, I would go to somebody and I would say I want you to hold me accountable. If you see things in my life that are not right, I want you to be honest with me, and I want you to tell me. I have people that I go to on a regular basis. The reason I do that is because I have a unique ability. It is so unique that is common to everybody, and it is we do a good job of fooling ourselves. If you are not careful, you can justify, rationalize, talk yourself into anything, and make everything seem acceptable. So you have to have somebody who looks you in the eye and says you are wrong. You are off base. If you don't have somebody like that, you need to find somebody and find them quick.

The last word. You need to understand that it is only through what Christ has done for you that your sins can really be forgiven. If you try to do it any other way except to walk one day in the presence of Jesus Christ, as Greg said, and say Lord, I want you to forgive me, and day by day I want you to forgive me. If you try to do it any other way, it is going to be like an old corpse that will resurrect and will come back and haunt you forever. Forgiveness is only found in Jesus Christ. Let me ask you. Has God been working inside of you? How have you been responding to the voice inside? You been squelching,

justifying it, or are you willing to get honest with God, and say, God you have been trying to tell me what you want me to do. Today I want to get honest with you, and today I want to say whatever you want me to do, that's what I want to do.