

I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. Acts 24:16

The story is told of two men who lived in a small village in Africa who got into a terrible dispute that they could not resolve. So they decided to talk to the chief of the tribe. The first man went to the chief and told his version of what happened. When he finished, the chief said, "You're absolutely right." The next night, the second man called on the chief and told his side of the story. The chief responded, "You're absolutely right." Afterward, the chief's wife scolded her husband. "Those men told you two different stories and you told them they were absolutely right. That's impossible -- they can't both be absolutely right." The chief turned to his wife and said, "You're absolutely right." The reality of this story is the reality of our day; much too often in the culture and society we live in it seems as if we have lost the standard for what is right and wrong - as the call to be tolerant of others, irrespective of what they might believe, is the real "right" thing to do. And as a result our personal and moral compasses no longer point to the north star of God's truth but rather to the frozen south of moral ambiguity. It seems in many ways as if we are back to the Old Testament time of the judges, when we read that: *"In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes"* (Judges 17:6; 21:25).

This morning we continue in our Seeking Him series which is focused on how we can know a deeper intimacy in our relationship with God, and today we will be looking at another means in God's Word, by which by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can seek God and grow in our walk with God. In the past weeks we've already seen the need, and have taken the steps of humility, honesty, repentance, grace, holiness and obedience - and today we are looking at both the need and the means by which we can seek God through a *clear conscience*. You would think this wouldn't be a problem once we've embraced and pursued the steps of humility, honesty, repentance, grace, holiness and obedience. But the reality the outworking of our remaining fallen nature is that quite often we can find ourselves embracing and pursuing standards, values and principles that are contrary to the standards, values and principles of God – without having any unsettledness in our hearts, minds, spirits and souls.

In our text for this morning the apostle Paul said: *"I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man"* (Acts 24:16). In a general sense, the Greek the word "*conscience*" that Paul uses here means "*one's knowledge or awareness of the nature of one's own thoughts, motives, and actions.*" In a specific sense the word "*conscience*" means "*distinguishing between what is morally good and bad, prompting one to do the former and shun the latter, commending one, condemning the other.*" Now Paul is speaking these words as he stands before Felix, the governor of the Roman province of Judea. Paul's a prisoner of the Romans at the request of the Jewish leadership, and he is being asked to defend himself against three accusations: 1) that he was a revolutionary zealot who sought to stir up riots throughout the empire, 2) that he was a religious radical, a leader of group that was following Jesus, and 3) that he was a sacrilegious fanatic who had tried to profane the Jewish temple by allowing Gentiles to join with them. In Acts 24:10-21 Paul responds by saying they have no proof regarding the first charge, and they have misinterpreted both his actions and intent concerning the third accusation.

But, pertaining to the second charge of following Jesus, the apostle pleads guilty: *"But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man"* (Acts 24:14-16). This is a bold statement from Paul, considering that Felix's wife was a Jew and the daughter of Herod Agrippa, the king who had already put James the brother of Jesus to death - and considering Felix was immoral and corrupt and known to eliminate even family and friends who happened to get in the way of his personal passions or political ambitions.

Yet despite of the standards or values or principles that Felix stood for; regardless whatever personal or political or social causes the governor may have held to; in spite of the reality that Paul was facing death for what he believed and was doing for the cause of Christ, Paul proclaimed his loyalty to Jesus, the one whom he loved and to whom had surrendered his heart. In 1 Timothy 1:5 he wrote: *"The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."* What this means is that love is a natural consequence of *"a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."* This is the call of Christ we hear in Mark 12:30-31: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength"* and to *"love your neighbor as yourself"*

This is the same relational connection we have seen in the previous seven weeks of our series in seeking God. While it is true that all the means of growing deeper in our relationship with God that we've looked so far have been primarily focused on the depth of our relationship with God, there has *always* been horizontal relationship implications with others that flows out of a humble, honest, repentant, grace-filled, holy, obedient relationship with God. We affirm that in our text for today in that our our relationship with God cannot deepen if we do not have *"a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith"* with one another. We cannot love God in isolation from all other relationships. Love is our inner commitment to God that is expressed in all our conduct and relationships. It is virtually impossible to love God not love another human being. 1 John 4:20-21 tells us: *"If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother."* Jesus even told us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). In other words, our love for God is revealed in how we love one another and others.

It is essential that we understand and live out how love and a clear conscience work together because we are experts at justifying our lack of love. But regardless of how we might justify our lack of love for each other and others, 1 John 4:7-8 tells us that *"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love."* When we refuse to love one another and others its because we have refused to love God, which is *sin* as it violates the Greatest Commandment to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength - and to love our neighbors, our families, our friends, our enemies and each other as God loves us. *"I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward BOTH God and man."* It's more than significant that Paul uses the word *"pain"* in speaking of his pursuit of a clear conscience.

The word *"conscience"* in the Greek and English speak of being awake or aware of something in us; thus the word *"unconscious"* is the word we use when we are comatose or unaware. The reality of living life in a fallen world, as saved saints who still possess remaining in our hearts, is that the *"conscience"* part of our lives of which we are awake and aware is only the mere tip of the colossal iceberg of that is going on deep down in our hearts, souls and minds. The truth is, the overwhelming majority of the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual work takes place below the water line of our consciousness of which we are unaware of and deliberately ignore or suppress when we are awakened to it. The theologian Karl Barth wrote: *"How much harm comes from the forcible suppression of memories contrary to the will of God: memories which we ought to have, but for some reason or other seek to avoid; memories which we try to conceal under images of the present and future, but which God Himself has not concealed; memories which we cannot really succeed in obliterating, but which merely become the cause of psychological disorders. Enforced oblivion is as bad as enforced recollection."*

Now before we dismiss this all as *"psychobabble"* we must affirm the reality that there is more than just the darkness of sinful flesh going on below the waterline of our consciousness. Because we were created in the image of God, there are also explosions of the wonder of God's love and grace and mercy at work and intermingling with the beauty of human creativity – seeking to trace image of the reality God's glory and God's truth back into our hearts and souls and minds in everything we do.

And so, as saved saints who still possess remaining in our hearts, we are for the most part, a complex mixture of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual realities swimming together in a reservoir of drives, ambitions, fears and desires – at sometimes working together, but for the most part fighting against each other, quietly below the water line our our awareness until the day we die and are taken into the presence of God forever, when everything will be exposed and forgiving and sorted out and placed together in perfect harmony. Jesus implied a foreshadow of this John 8:32 when he said: *“And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* Someday we will see and know who we truly are. But in the meantime, we are still here in the mix and muck painfully pursuing a *“clear conscience toward both God and man”* – because in that pursuit, sin – ours and each others’ - will continue to be our enemy.

But by God’s grace, we are not alone in that pursuit. In Christ, we are promised that the Holy Spirit will awaken us and make us aware of our sin, so we might turn back to God for forgiveness and cleanings and restoration, which will give us *clear conscience toward BOTH God and man.*” This is what Paul meant in Philippians 2:12-13: *“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”* Brothers and sisters conviction and guilt are the warnings God has put in place to let us know that something is wrong. Conviction and guilt reveal that we’re going the wrong direction, and something needs to change. This is why we must not ignore conviction and guilt, but rather humbly seek out the cause of our conviction/guilt without blaming someone else. The reality is when we do something wrong and we don’t feel guilty or convicted it’s because our *“consciences are seared”* (1 Timothy 4:2) - and then we’re in real trouble.

God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Romans 1:18). We tend to see this verse in the context of serial killers and child molesters, but again the reality is – sin is sin. All sin is ungodly and unrighteous. And since James 4:17 tells us that, *“whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin”* – we had better define *“the right thing”* and as how God’s Word defines *“the right thing.”* In Titus 1:15 we read that: *“To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled.”* So how can we know if our consciences are *“seared”* or *“defiled”*? Well, the Word of God reveals to us at least four ways we can tell:

1) Our consciences our defiled and seared *we we keep repeating our sin instead of repenting of sin.* *“No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him”* (1 John 3:6). If God is in you, you’ll be really uncomfortable with ignoring your conscience. A conscience ignored is a crack in the soul. Enough cracks and your soul will crumble. Each repeated sin is a cancer that advances and destroys. In 1 Timothy 1:18-19 Paul writes that we are to – *“wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith.”*

2) Our consciences are defiled and seared *when we do not acknowledge and confess our sin.* *“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside”* (Romans 3:9-12). If you haven’t acknowledged or confessed for a while, you might want to ask why you keep holding onto your sin. The reality of our remaining fallen sinful nature in Romans 3:9-12 is the reality of our lives. God doesn’t expect us to be perfect, but He does expect us to be real. The purpose of our conscience is to keep us real. Most of us don’t enjoy acknowledging and confessing our sin. But the reality is that when we don’t do either, we miss out on the blessing of God’s grace: *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9).

3) Our consciences are defiled and seared *when we hide our sin.* *“The sins of some men are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden”* (1 Timothy 5:24-25). We see this in the life of Pastor Ted Haggard, who used to be the lead pastor of the 14,000-member New Life Church in Colorado Springs, and as well as the national director of the National Association of Evangelicals in the United States.

Pastor Ted Haggard was removed 10 years ago because of habitual drug use and sexual immorality, which had been occurring for number of years. Hopefully most of us don't have those kinds of hidden things going on in our lives. But because *"the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"* (Jeremiah 17:9) we all, to differing degrees, have something hidden in our hearts or on our minds or up our sleeves or under our beds or on our hard drives below the water line of life. But we will have a clear conscience when our lives are *"hidden with Christ in God"* (Colossians 3:3).

4) Our consciences are defiled and seared *when we rationalize our sin. "We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ"* (2 Corinthians 10:5). We all know to rationalize our sin: "Everyone else is doing it. It's not illegal. No one's getting hurt. It's was a mistake. They deserve it. I deserve it. No one will ever know. Its not a big deal. What goes around comes around. God helps those who help themselves." Rationalizing our sin is fatal: *"But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death"* (James 1:14-15).

As long as we repeat, refuse to acknowledge/confess, hide or rationalize our sin, our consciences will continue to be defiled and seared. Sin is deceptive and sin has consequences. But remember, sin does not have the final word as there is a solution to sin – and that solution is Jesus Christ: *"You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning"* (1 John 3:5-6). Regarding our sin, in spite of our sin, because of our sin – Jesus is our hope. Amen?

In Psalm 139:23-24 King David wrote: *"Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"* These are the words of a man who was seeking a *"clear conscience toward both God and man."* Yet this is a hard truth for us, as we struggle to live in a fallen world with a sinful nature that still lives within us. It is, at times, frustrating and troubling that life is not fair or neat, or nice. Though the Bible tells us that *"for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose"* (Romans 8:28) - not everything *seems* to happen for a good purpose. Terrible and horrible things seem to happen at precisely the wrong time. The best of motives and intentions, done with the greatest of diligence, often just disintegrate. Yet wonderful things happen to mean, selfish people.

Great men of God are found out to be caught up in immorality and drug abuse. Students bring guns to school and kill their teachers. Terrorists tie bombs to their bodies and blow up innocent men, women and children. Politicians raise millions of dollars by slandering their opponents. Business owners in North America make millions of dollars by spending millions of dollars on advertising - while millions of people are in poverty and millions of people are dying of starvation throughout the world. In many places its now illegal to pray to God at a public event, because it offends those who don't believe in God. Sympathetic judges release habitual child molesters because they have behaved in prison where there is no opportunity to be with children. Justin Trudeau became Prime Minister by running against Stephen Harper and for the legalization of marijuana. Billionaire Donald Trump is currently leading the polls for the Republican party for president in the U.S because he running against all politicians and anybody that says anything against him. And the barista at Starbucks gave me the wrong coffee.

in such a world, it's is hard thing to have a *"clear conscience toward both God and man."* So often things seem crooked and out of balance and somewhat tilted to wrong side. As a pastor, it often seems I deal with much more pain and struggle than anything else. We who are saved saints, who still possess a fallen nature, can sometimes be pretty selfish and thin-skinned. I am grateful for the times when the Spirit calls me out for being so. I pray for me and I pray for you and I pray for us that we would not confuse having clear conscience with making peace with our sin. Sometimes we have to work hard to find out way out of the fog of chaos. But as followers of Jesus, this is our calling. You see, you and I are called to love God and love each other in the midst of this fallen life of filled with raw ambiguity.

In Christ we are to be a people who love God and love one another in order that good might come out of the multiple kinds of pain, struggle and chaos that comes at us and from us. Together we need to start doing off-the-wall stuff like turning the other cheek and going the second mile and embracing the unlovable - and forgiving those who hurt us and when we hurt ourselves. The truth is we are all here to literally “love hell out of the world.” Some years ago back in Wisconsin when, right after we raked up all the leaves in our yard, our neighbor’s tree let loose and filled up our front yard with more leaves than we’ve ever had before. Kind of disheartening. But the next day, without any prompting, our neighbor came over and raked them up all up. This is what God calls us to do! He sent us into the world in order to get out and help clean up the mess we live in - because lot of it’s ours anyways.

This past week I went to a website called www.deathclock.com. All you have to do is type in your date of birth, and answer a couple questions like, do you smoke, what’s your height and weight, etc. Then you hit enter and it will give you your estimated day of expiration. According to Death Clock I’m going to die on Sunday, March 5, 2028. And then I tried it again, and it told me I was going to die on Monday, April 27, 2043. And then I tried it again, and it said Tuesday, May 19, 2048. And then I tried it again, and it said Saturday, March 26, 2053. I wondered that if I kept submitting my info, if at some point it would tell me that I would live forever. Actually I already know that’s true. Jesus said: *“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also”* (John 14:1-3).

Death Clock is the internet’s friendly reminder that life is slipping away - second by second. And the reality is – *it is*. George Bernard Shaw once wrote: “The statistics on death are quite impressive, one out of one people die.” That’s true also. Our Christian brothers and sisters in Syria, North Korea, Iran, Sudan and China do not have any illusions about death. For them, living for Jesus is a dangerous life- threatening existence. But in the midst of it all they avidly seek out ways and means to love God and live out God’s love into the lives of those around them, in the place where God has providentially called them. Paul said: *“I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man.”* He spoke these words facing the reality of his own death at the hands of those who were listening to him. I think Paul reflected on this when he wrote: *“Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience”* (2 Corinthians 5:11).

I’m not sure what issues of conscience we all might be wrestling with today, but whatever they are I would encourage all of us to respond to the restlessness within our hearts and simply step out and grab a rake and take responsibility to clean it up. The Death Clock is ticking. Time is short and the only reason you and I are still here is because our sovereign God wants us to be instruments of His love and grace in this chaotic mess we live in. The reality is most people don’t know what is right as God defines right, unless we show them. And we can’t show them until we *“take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man.”* Just before the death of actor W.C. Fields, a friend visited Fields’ hospital room and was surprised to find Fields, a well-known atheist, thumbing through a Bible. Asked what he was doing with a Bible, Fields said “I’m looking for loopholes.” Brothers and sisters there are no loopholes. There is only Jesus. We are called to make every effort *“to have a clear conscience toward both God and man”* regardless of the threat or cost. Our efforts reveal the depth of our love for God.

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me!
You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar.
You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether.
You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.*

*Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.*

*For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.

*My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

*Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.*

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!

And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting! Psalm 139:1-18; 23-24

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Pastor Leland Botzet

Arrowsmith Baptist Church