

Conscience (Part 1)

The End Times

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 16-Apr-94; Sermon #124

We are going to begin this sermon in II Timothy 3. I think it is good to be able to see this in its context, because this is the chapter that begins describing what the times are going to be like in the end.

II Timothy 3:1 This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come.

Paul gives a series of examples of how people are going to be thinking in their primary thoughts. They are going to be very self-centered about the conduct of their lives. In the next few verses he talks about deceivers coming along, deceiving people, and people resisting the truth of God. In verse 10 the teaching begins to become very direct and forceful in regard to what Timothy's responsibility is going to be in this time. If it is fit for Timothy, it is instruction for you and me because we are much closer to the end than Timothy ever was.

II Timothy 3:10 But you have carefully followed my doctrine.

I am going to insert the word "my" in verses 10 and 11. It does not actually appear in the Greek, but I just want to emphasize it, because I want to point out what Paul is talking about here. He is talking about a problem that existed within the church during Paul's time, and it continued to get worse and worse. When we get into the apostle John's writings, which were written about thirty years later, we find that what Paul talked about had advanced to a very great degree of heresy.

The apostle John built much of the book of I John around the very thing Paul is talking about in II Timothy 3:10-11 because of the way John begins his epistle. He is saying, "Remember where you got the truth." That is exactly what Paul is saying here.

II Timothy 3:10-11 But you [Timothy] have carefully followed [my] doctrine, [my] manner of life, [my] purpose, [my] faith, [my] longsuffering, [my] love, [my] perseverance, [my] persecutions, [my] afflictions which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured. And out of them all the Lord delivered me.

Paul is pointing out to Timothy where learned the truth. It was through the apostle Paul. That is exactly what John did later. He said to these people, without saying it directly, "Where did you get the truth?" He is saying, "Let me remind you where you got the truth." The reason he is saying this is because false teachers were infiltrating the church, and they were coming up with doctrines that were different from the ones that had been taught by the apostles.

In some cases they may have been overtly different. In other cases they were skewing off to the side, but they were going in a direction that the apostles could very clearly see was taking people away from the way of God. So he points Timothy back to where Timothy got the truth. Timothy got the doctrine from Paul. He had Paul's example in all parts of Paul's life.

II Timothy 3:12 Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

Reflect on the word "persecution" for just a bit because we tend to think of persecution in terms of pain being inflicted on somebody, that the person's life is being threatened, or the person is even being thrown in jail. The application of this word is broader than that, and actually includes persecution in the sense of just being taught things that are not right. The word literally means, "to follow after closely," like you are stepping on somebody's heels and giving the person who is walking ahead of you some trouble. So persecution is "to follow after closely."

This persecution was coming in the form of doctrines that were not quite right. In some cases they were wrong altogether, but they were skewing off to the side and persecution was coming in that form.

II Timothy 3:13-15 But evil men and impostors will grow **worse** and **worse**, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you [Timothy], continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

My concern in starting off in this place is both the Bible and history show that human nature will degenerate as far as it is allowed. Evil men and impostors will wax (grow) worse and worse, or they will go from bad to worse. Human nature always has a tendency to degenerate, and I want you to tie this into the series of sermons that began two sermons ago.

Last week I said, "Do not stand still." What I am beginning to say right here, now, is that conscious efforts have to be made to keep from slipping backward. Human nature, if it is allowed, will degenerate and just keep on going. If it is left on its own, the tendency is almost invariably down and backwards. However, we have found if there is strong leadership, sometimes the tendency is up.

The book of Judges, the book of Kings, and the book of Chronicles shows this very clearly. If there was a good judge, then people tended to follow in that direction. If there was a bad judge, the bottom dropped out of peoples' morals and ethics. The same thing happened with the kings. If there was a good king, things turned in the right direction. Human nature, you see, has this proclivity to adapt to its environment. That is of great concern to any minister who is worth his salt, who is concerned about the well-being of the flock for which he is responsible.

Paul was concerned about false teaching coming into the congregation. That is why he wrote this to Timothy to be very careful, because the proclivity of human nature is to go in the direction that is prevalent within the congregation. If there is good leadership, it will have a tendency to go up. If the leadership is weak or passive, it will have a tendency to go down. Human nature has that proclivity, and so Paul was admonishing Timothy to make an effort to continue.

It is interesting that these people who were introducing the heresies within the congregation, delusion or deception was their weapon, and it was by delusion or deception that they themselves were being slain. I am not talking about being literally killed, but they were heading toward the lake of fire through the very things that they were teaching.

I think it is my experience from reading God's Word that the hardest part of Christianity is not finding new things, but continuing in or holding on to that which we have already learned. The reason for this is because human nature is so adaptable. There is this *sheep* tendency that is in all of us, and we want to conform to the environment that we are in.

Out in the world, we can look at all kinds of cultures, like the aborigines, or the Pygmies, and even cannibals that have cultures we would be very quick to label as degenerate. That might be a harsh judgment of them, but we would at least say that they are primitive, that they are not as well developed culturally as we are. And yet, if you have done any kind of reading about these people who live in these kind of cultures, you will find these people have strictures, or laws, or codes that they live by that regulate their conduct. While it might be all right for them to murder and eat somebody from another tribe, it is not right for them to eat somebody from their *own* tribe. Minds adjust to accept that kind of standard.

Now, what is it that holds *you* in check? What is it that makes you keep a rein on yourself that might keep you from disobeying? What is it that says to you, "I will go this far, and no further"? Some might say it is the fear of God. That is fine, but I think more of us would be likely to say that it is our conscience than it is the fear of God.

Much of what guides people in the Western world in which there has been a fair amount of contact with the Bible, and the religions that tend to be based at least somewhat on the Bible, that a fair amount of what guides people is not in the Bible.

The Western world *thinks* that what guides the people is the Bible. Even though there has been a fair amount of contact with the Bible and the religions tend to be based at least somewhat on the Bible, it is not the Bible that guides the people. They *think* that it is in the Bible, but it is not really in the Bible. For instance, Sunday might be one of these we might refer to as very easily seen. A guiding principle is, "Let your conscience be your guide."

That is held to be a pretty high principle by many, but we have to ask a question: What happens if one does not have a conscience, or if a person's conscience is weakly developed? What if some person's conscience is radically different from yours? That is always a possibility.

It is interesting that the Hebrew language has no word to correspond to the English word or the Greek word "conscience." According to the language experts, if the Bible is any example, the Hebrew thinking did not tend to be very introspective, and the concept of what we might call "an inner voice" came from other cultures. However, a close examination of the Old Testament does show that even though they did not have a word for conscience, the idea or the concept indeed is there. It is not nearly brought to our attention as much in the Old Testament as it is in the New Testament. This tends to agree with what these experts say, that the idea of "an inner voice" came from cultures other than the Hebrew, because if it had come from the Hebrew, it is very likely they would have had a word to clearly identify it, but they do not.

Now "conscience" literally means, "We know." To expand on it a little bit it means "to know inwardly." Another way of describing it would be "knowledge along with." The prefix "con" means "with," so it is "knowledge along with." Let us expand that a little bit further. Conscience is that faculty within us that decides moral rightness or wrongness.

As we begin to lay the groundwork for this sermon, I want you to think about human nature, that it is very adaptable. If we happen to be in a culture that is on the upswing morally, then human nature tends to adapt, and the conscience becomes more sensitive to things moral and ethical than it had been before. However, the general tendency is always down, and if one is in an environment that is headed down, like the one we are living in right now, it takes quite a struggle to resist that, because our conscience can adjust almost subconsciously.

I might remind you that there are things we invite into our own homes on television that fifty years ago you would have had to go to a porno house to see. But the conscience of the American mind has adjusted to that in just a very short period of time. We need to think about this because we want to make sure that we continue in and hold fast to the doctrine we have received, and with that doctrine the standards of the Kingdom of God. The tendency is always to slide downward. Unless it is consciously fought, then it is very likely we are going to find the conscience adjusting to the environment, and in this case the environment is sliding into the pits. It is that faculty within us that decides moral rightness or wrongness.

Here are some other definitions of the word "conscience": (1) An exercise of judgment based on certain standards of behavior combined with a feeling of responsibility. (2) Compulsion to do what the mind feels is right. (3) Man's moral intuition which passes judgment on his own state. It both approves and disapproves. (4) The sense or consciousness of the moral goodness or blameworthiness of one's own conduct, intentions, or character, together with a feeling of obligation to right or be good.

This one final definition of conscience is short, but I think it catches the essence of one of the original ones where I said, "knowledge along with," man's moral self, along with his cognitive self; his moral self, along with his thinking capacities, or thinking ability.

(5) The response of man's moral awareness. This is the Bible's application of all these definitions. Those other definitions I did not get out of the Bible, but I feel that this last one catches the essence because it gives a Bible position: "The response of man's moral awareness."

Now what are you aware of that is moral from the biblical point of view? The response of man's moral awareness **to** the divine revelation concerning himself, his attitudes, and his activities.

One is aware or conscious that a proposed act is conformable, or not conformable, to one's ideal of right or wrong, and it manifests itself in a feeling of obligation or duty to either do, or refrain from doing. There is a problem in all of this, and that is that the conscience seems to be entirely a function of one's education. There seems to be no indication in the Bible that God installed a set of values that are resident within a person at birth. If God does install a set of values in a person at birth, why is there such a diversity of opinion regarding what is right or wrong? Why are there so many different cultures? Why are there so many different reactions to morality of a certain conduct?

The concept that conscience is something God builds right into us does not have any support that I can find in the Bible, but yet we do have a conscience. That conscience came from somewhere, and that somewhere seems to be from the education we have had from the time we were born, that it came from the absorption of the culture within which we are conducting our lives.

Acts 23:1 Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men and brethren, "I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day."

Paul said what he did he did in all good sincerity. Sincerity speaks of being undistorted, wholehearted, or without division, without dissimulation. But we have to ask a question: Undistorted, or without dissimulation in reference to what? Why was Paul's conscience clear? This is the same man who was responsible for the persecution and perhaps even the death of some Christians. Did he do that in good conscience? Yes he did! He did it in full sincerity that what he was doing was right. Was it right? Was it a righteous act? His conscience permitted it, but was it righteous? So the question has to be: Undistorted, clear, in reference to *what*?

You see, it was in reference to the education that the apostle Paul received from the time he was born, but it was not a righteous act that he did at all. Now in another place he says that he was forgiven for what he did because he did what he did in ignorance. Do you see an admission there? His education was not what it could have been. There was a lack there. So he did what he did, thinking that he was right. The conscience was clear. We could take the same principle into other peoples' lives.

Is it possible that people such as Adolph Hitler did what he did in a clear conscience in conducting the war in Europe? I understand that decimation of lives in Russia was far greater than what happened in Germany or Europe. Some 20 million people died in Russia as a result of the activities of the Communist Party there, beginning sometime around 1917, and at the crux of all this was Joseph Stalin. They were killing Russians and other Slavs. Did he do what he did in a good conscience? I do not know.

The apostle Paul said he did what he did in a good conscience, but we already begin to see that the education was lacking, and because the education was lacking, he was in ignorance. The conscience was very easily able to adapt to the education that he already had up to that time.

I Timothy 1:3 As I urged you when I went into Macedonia—remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine.

What is the danger here? The danger is that people are going to be led in a different direction from God's way of life. It is very likely that as they begin to accept the heresies of false doctrine, something is going to happen to the conscience. It is going to adjust. The morality is going to do what? What is going to happen to their ethics? If you are moving away from God's morality, and moving away from God's ethics, the only way you can go is down.

The problem with false doctrine is that it not only takes a person out of the way, it takes down his moral and ethical education. It begins to take his spiritual level down, and with it goes his conscience. Things that maybe at one time in his life he never would have permitted, he begins to adjust to, and slowly but surely they begin to be something that is acceptable.

I Timothy 1:4-5 Nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith. Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith.

The intention here is not the Ten Commandments, but the charge rather that is given to the ministry, and in this case probably went from the apostle Paul to Timothy. The goal from this command is to love from a pure heart. That means without ulterior motives, from a good conscience, and sincere faith. It is highly likely that the apostle Paul put them (the pure heart, the good conscience, and sincere faith) in this order because that is the progression that usually takes place in a person's mind. First the heart, the seat of the intellect, the mind, the feelings, has to be affected. If the heart accepts the truth, then the conscience begins to follow.

Then what does faith do? It puts it into action, but what does it produce? It produces love. Love is always the goal. Paul shows a natural progression here, and this is the highest goal of the true religion. This is love that is totally unselfish in its loyalty to God, and also filled with boundless goodwill to our fellow man.

Paul is counseling Timothy in regard to the purpose of preaching. The purpose of preaching is practical. There are some translations that translate this "the stewardship of a minister." The purpose for the stewardship is always to lead to things that are practical, not speculative. He is counseling Timothy then to not get involved in these technical disputes because they are going to be occupying the mind in nothing more than a dangerous fad.

Remember that II Timothy 3 tells of these people arguing about endless genealogies and so forth. You will find this theme running through almost all the apostles' writings. It begins with Paul and it ends with the book of Jude, but the last to write about it was John. When we put these things together, Paul counsels Timothy to conform to the only way that will produce and maintain love among Christians.

If a man knows that his doings are in harmony with his law, or his ideal, then it is very likely that his conscience is going to be clear. It is going to be good, and that is good, because that is what God wants. There is a hitch. This shows up in the first chapter of Titus in more instruction to the ministry. Paul is talking about the propensity of people on the island of Crete. These people were in the church. You will find qualifications for elders in this very first chapter.

Titus 1:13 This testimony is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith.

These are people in the church. In verse 12, in a general way, he says that they are always liars.

Titus 1:14-15 Not giving heed to Jewish fables and commandments of men who turn from the truth. To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled.

Remember this is directed toward people in the church, and it is possible we can see here that a conscience can be defiled. The reference is very similar to what James says in James 3:11 where he says, "Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?" What you get is a contaminated mixture. That is what this word "defiled" means. In this context then Paul is saying that these peoples' minds, which enabled them to think and reflect on things moral and spiritual, had become polluted and perverted. Their conscience no longer then had the ability to restrain them from making incorrect judgments.

We have two points to consider: (1) Should you live according to your conscience? (2) Should you trust your conscience? The answer to the first question we are going to see confirmed in the Bible. Yes, we should live according to our conscience, but we are also going to see the answer to the second is *maybe*. Maybe you should trust your conscience. In other words, I am saying it should be open to some evaluation, because as we are already beginning to see, it is subject to the education we have had. I think we will all agree that our education in God's way is not yet complete.

John 16:1-2 These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. They will put you out of the synagogues: yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service.

This is a sobering verse. In an extreme case it did happen. Jesus' prophecy came true. It clearly shows that it is entirely possible to do an evil thing, like kill, and feel good about it. It can feel so good that the evil is considered to actually be an act of worship to God. Now how about *that* kind of a conscience?

These people that Jesus was concerned about were Christian people. I think it is clear from the context that He was talking about the persecutions that were going to come from others who were also familiar with the Word of God—most of the Jews who would be familiar with the Old Testament. This just reinforces the apostle Paul and what he did. His education was incomplete, and so he was able to persecute and perhaps even be responsible for the death of some Christians. Certainly he persecuted them to the extent that they were thrown into prison. He persecuted the true church, and he felt justified, he felt good, in what he did.

We can come up into history and think about things that took place during the Inquisition. There again we are faced with a historical situation in which people who were at least supposed to be familiar with the Word of God—in this case not just the Old Testament but also the New Testament—and yet they put to death many people who were really true Christians. They did what they did thinking that they were doing God a service, that they were actually doing an act of worship of God.

We can date that up even further to the present. We have people on earth who feel it is their duty to kill people of other religions because their god requires that of them, and they think they are earning themselves rewards. I am thinking of those who are a part of the Islamic faith, and putting together others who are not Islamic. The mind—the conscience—under the influence of human nature is very adaptable, so we have to be careful of it.

Let us look at a place in which the true church is involved. Here we have church members.

I Corinthians 5:1-5 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife! And you are puffed up [arrogant], and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged, as though I were present, concerning him who has so done this deed. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

They were glorying in an evil thing in the church! To their minds, their liberality was a good thing. How did it come to be this way? Why is there so much confusion? Why do people regard living according to one's conscience so highly? Confusion is part of the reason. Another part of it is that people learn they cannot trust their ideals to be absolute, and so it leads to a very weak conscience. They just are not sure.

In Romans 1:21 we have a situation that most commentators feel is directed or extracted from Gentile circumstances or from Gentile cultures, and that Paul is reflecting back upon a time many centuries prior to him, or maybe a whole millennium or two before him.

Romans 1:21 Because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Remember the series that Paul gave us. First the heart, then the conscience, and then faith. Now what happens if the heart is darkened rather than enlightened? In which direction is the conscience going to go? You already know the answer to that. It is not going to go up. The standards and ideals are not going to become higher. If God is left out of the picture, the conscience is going to slide into the gutter, and that is the illustration here.

Romans 1:22 Professing to be wise, they became fools.

Romans 1:28 And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting.

They rejected God. What is the conscience going to be like that is in a debased mind? Their vain reasoning led to foolishness. I think what undoubtedly happened was that they did not want to retain God in their knowledge, and so God just let them do their thing. What resulted then was a reprobate mind whose standards permitted such things. A reprobate mind is a mind devoid of judgment. How trustworthy is a mind that cannot judge properly? How can it judge properly if it does not have the right standards?

What follows in the remaining portions of this chapter tell then the action that follows when standards other than God's are substituted in place of God's, because God is left out of one's knowledge.

Think of this in terms of a cultural thing. As each person is born, his mind accepts what is a part of that culture, and his conscience adapts. What kind of action then follows? The same things that we see listed here at the end of Romans 1 are what follow. There is one additional thing. Because the tendency of human nature is downward, especially in a culture in which God is not a part, each generation takes it one step lower. That is why Paul could constantly say that evil men shall grow worse and worse.

We looked here at a Gentile culture. I am going to refer you to two places. One is in Ezekiel 20. We are going to see it is almost like God conducted an experiment. "We tried this with the Gentiles, now let us try it with the Israelites and see what happens to them." And then He recorded the results.

Ezekiel 20:23-25 Also I lifted My hand in an oath to those in the wilderness, that I would scatter them among the Gentiles and disperse them throughout the countries, because they had not executed My judgments but had despised My statutes, profaned My

Sabbaths, and their eyes were fixed on their fathers' idols. Therefore I also gave them up to statutes that were not good, and judgments by which they could not live.

Are you beginning to see they did the same things as the Gentiles? They did not retain God in their knowledge, and God gave *them* up to a reprobate mind. We are talking here in the book of Ezekiel about God's experience with the Israelites, and primarily the ten northern tribes. Now what about Judah? Did He make the same experiment with Judah?

Psalm 81:12-14 So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, to walk in their own counsels. Oh, that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways! I would soon subdue their enemies, and turn My hand against their adversaries.

They did the same thing. "I gave them over to their own stubborn heart." Now this is directed at all of Israel, including the Jews. When God is left out of the picture people are going to go downhill.

There is another possibility that at least needs to be looked at in Romans 2.

Romans 2:14-15 For when the Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things contained in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them.

On occasion, but not very often, a culture that has no direct contact with God and His Word will somehow come up with a system that is quite moral and pretty much in agreement with much of God's way. What happens is the conscience rises in its approach to standards that may even come close to the standards of God so that it will bear witness, either accusing or excusing. Or we might change that to say restraining or permitting. That is what the function of a conscience is.

It restrains or it permits. If it restrains, and we go ahead, the conscience feels defiled. If it restrains, and we stop ourselves, the conscience feels clear. If it permits and we go ahead and do it, the conscience feels clear. If it permits, and we do not do it, the conscience will probably feel bad. We probably have a society that at least somewhat approximates this to some extent over there in Singapore, where in comparisons with the United States, crime is almost non-existent. I would imagine that the conscience of those people, compared to most Americans, is quite tender indeed.

Conscience does not determine what is right or wrong; rather it recognizes the law or standards that it has been educated in, and responds. A conscience must be educated, but the education might be lacking, and the conscience is not always to be trusted.

Jeremiah 10:23 O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps.

I think you can see the impossibility of man's conscience being totally a reliable guide. Now if the way of man is not in himself, does that not show that God does not install a set of values in a man at birth? It is just not there. The conscience has to be installed, and it is installed from our contact with the culture, beginning with the family.

Education is pretty much lacking until God calls us and begins to convert us. As He converts us, the conscience begins to slowly adjust to the standard of God, and so conscience is quite adaptable. It

will go up and down according to what it recognizes as the value that has been instilled within each individual. You can see this leads to interesting things.

There are over 5 billion people on earth, and it is entirely possible to have 5 billion different conscience-thought levels. Eventually God wants us all to be of one mind, but we are not there yet. You can see what a job God has in front of Him, trying to get His people to be of one mind. I am glad that He is the one responsible. I am glad He is the Creator, because what we are looking at here is something that is impossible with man. It just cannot be done. So man's conscience cannot be a totally reliable guide because his way is not in him, and his conscience is going to permit or restrain according to the way that is in him.

Ephesians 4:17 This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind.

Do you get the picture here? Paul is writing to a predominately Gentile congregation in a Gentile city that also had some Jews in it. He is admonishing these people that they were to no longer live their lives according to the standards and ways of the culture to which they had just been called out of. There had to be a change.

They were educated in that culture and their conscience adapted to that education. Now they were being educated in God's way, or God's culture, and God's way was going to impress itself on them. We have a part in this, and that is why the admonishment is given that they are to no longer walk, to no longer conduct their lives in the futility of their Gentile minds.

Let us broaden this word "Gentile" out just a little bit further. The reference is to those who are unconverted. In the spiritual sense, in the Bible, those who are converted are Jews. Those who are unconverted are Gentiles regardless of their ethnic background. In other words, those who are not Israelites by blood can be seen from the Bible's perspective as being Gentiles—the unconverted.

I say that because I want all of us to see and be of the same mind in regard to this word "Gentile," and regard to the "you" and "us" and "we" that appear here, because those who are converted are the "Israelites." They are the Jews. Those who are unconverted are the Gentiles. So it applies to everybody, regardless of your ethnicity. All of us are in this state.

Ephesians 4:17-18 This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart.

How can the conscience be correct if they are walking in the dark? How can the conscience be correct if the light of God's Word, of His truth, has not shined into their hearts, and if their heart is hardened?

Ephesians 4:19 Who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to licentiousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.

In other words, they do things that are impure greedily, and voraciously. You might say they are jumping into it. I mentioned having a tender conscience. How can the conscience be tender if the people are past feeling? In other words, they can do evil things with a clear conscience.

From the Bible's perspective then, the Christian is seen as a third race of people. The one race is the Gentiles, the second race is the unconverted Israelites, and the third race is the converted people in the church having God's Spirit. They are the "new" man. They are the nation that is going to become the Kingdom of God. These people then are "in the Lord," and Paul insists that because of this they have to abandon their former way of life. Conversion is a transfer in the person from the flesh to the spirit. It is a transfer from the world to the Kingdom of God. The beginning point is seen as baptism.

What does this mean then, in practical fact, in reference to conscience? It means that if we are continually growing, if our knowledge of Jesus Christ is increasing, the mind is going to be expanded in its understanding of God.

What is the next step? The conscience changes in order to allow faith to work so that love can be produced. This is what is happening in our conversion. Conscience is very important. I do not want to diminish it in any way. We need to understand that as we are growing it is constantly changing, and it should be constantly moving higher to ascend to meet the values of God, and to be in the image of Him.

Conscience is not a static part of a person's makeup, but rather it is seen in the Bible as a **very** important dynamic that needs to be protected. It is protected through embellishment that comes with growth, and if we are growing then it will not slip backwards. I can guarantee you that it will tend toward becoming softer, more tender, more acute in its feelings about right and wrong. It will refine our judgments as to what we should do, or what we should not do, in order to produce love. Its aim is to always produce love, because that is the end result of the change.

We find here that these people are past feeling. If we come to understand sin in the right way, this is really one of the terrifying things about sin, because it tends to harden a person's conscience. It petrifies it. It becomes so contaminated that it has no flexibility in it. We have to understand that no one becomes a great sinner all at once. There is a progression to it that alters the feelings as we go along. We can go in a positive direction, or we can go in a negative direction.

I will tell you what that progression backwards is. If we first go against our conscience we will regard with horror what we considered to be sin, and we will abhor ourselves. We will want to crawl into a shell, one might say. But if we allow ourselves to do it again, the horror will begin to change to something that approaches to merely having regret, or to just being a little bit sorry.

When we are in that stage we may even be still trying to hide it. What will happen is that we will gradually begin to rationalize why we allowed ourselves to do it until finally we are justifying. The next stage is that we will begin to accept ourselves with very little remorse. And then finally we will get to the place where we do not even care, and we are totally its slave.

What I just described to you is the "addictive" process. That is what happens to people who take drugs. They finally get to the place where they are the slave of the drug—something they did not think was very smart at first, but they get to the place where they are doing everything the drug wants them to do. This process can be reversed, but it is not easy. The best thing for us is to never let it happen. Do not even let it get started.

God describes Babylon and all of the world as "being drunk with the wine of the wrath of her fornication." Do you think that God knew what He was saying in using the term "wine"? Wine has alcohol in it that has addictive properties. So does sin have addictive properties to it. I might get to talking about that a little bit later.

Proverbs 13:19 A desire accomplished is sweet to the soul, but it is an abomination to fools to depart from evil.

This verse is showing that feelings cannot be trusted. This is another reason why we should be careful about our conscience because it gives out feelings, and those feelings motivate us to go in a certain direction. Those feelings have to be checked and double-checked because they are going to affect our judgment. Because of the education we had, desire may be absolutely and totally evil, but it feels good in the accomplishment of it because the mind is crying out for satisfaction.

I am going to read that verse to you from the *Amplified Bible* because they have caught the essence of the verse a lot more clearly by amplifying it.

Proverbs 13:19 [The Amplified Version] Satisfied desire is sweet to a person. [The verse is not saying at this point that the desire is either good or bad. It is only showing the effect of following through with a desire.] Therefore it is hateful and exceedingly offensive to self-confident fools to give up evil upon which they have set their hearts.

The conscience does that because the conscience will permit them to do an evil thing and to change to something that is good would be painful. An interesting concept. So there are times, brethren, when our conscience has to be overridden by the cognitive part of our mind. See, it is feeling *along with* thinking. In a case like this, if we know something is right, the feeling may be misleading us, and we have to make the effort to follow the thinking part of our mind rather than following the feeling part.

We only follow the feeling part when it agrees with what the thinking part says. One has to be sublimated to the other. The reason for this is that feeling is much more variable and much more intense than the thinking aspects, and yet the cognitive part is the part that has to dominate based upon the education that the person has received. Hopefully, that education is going to be in God's way.