

Conscience (Part 2)

Knowing and Using Your Conscience

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We are going to continue in this sermon on the subject of conscience I spoke on about a month ago. A little bit of review is in order at the beginning of this sermon because I want to go over the main points I covered during that message.

The first one was that conscience does not appear to be a faculty that God instills in a person at birth. I want to modify what I said in that sermon so that it is a bit more accurate. By virtue of the fact that man has a spirit, he does have what I would call a natural awareness of a God. He may call that God the Creator. He may call it a higher power. He may call it a first-cause. But conscience is a great deal more complex than merely being aware of a God.

God has created us with the ability to have a conscience. A conscience functions according to the standards or ideals that are a part of a person's education, and each person's experiences in life are somewhat different. The only conclusion that can be determined is that those standards by which a conscience operates are not installed at birth. Rather, they are a part of our education and our experiences of life.

In this light, one can see that conscience is a vital part of the function of free moral agency—an aspect of our mind that either gives approval or disapproval to an attitude, an activity, or even one's judgment of himself in an overall sense.

The second thing we covered in that sermon was quite a number of definitions of conscience. The one I liked best—because I felt it described conscience best—was: "Man's moral intuition which passes judgment on his own state." When applied to the Bible, that definition becomes the response of man's moral awareness to the divine revelation concerning himself, his attitudes, and his activities.

The key here is man's awareness to the divine revelation concerning himself. Think of this in terms of yourself and your brethren within the church. I think you will agree with me that there is in this a wide degree of intensity of conscience among brethren. Each person's awareness of God and His way is going to be different because each one's experience with God, and his knowledge of God, is at somewhat different levels. Is that not true? Yes it is.

Some of us have been in the church twenty years, thirty years, and some ten years or five years. Our experiences are different because we have come into our conversion from different angles and different backgrounds. Some of us may be sharper than others intellectually. God may have given us differing gifts. All of these things working together allow for different intensities of conscience and different levels of understanding. We are going to find within the church different approaches to things and different feelings of intensity about right and wrong. This point leads directly to the third point.

The third point is that a conscience can function only according to what it knows, and in relation to God, only according to what it knows about God and about His way. If a person is ignorant of the moral standards of God, the conscience cannot function at that level. It is simply beyond that person's grasp. This allows a person to do evil things—evil in relation to how God defines it—and to do it in a perfectly clear conscience. Proof of this is John 16:2, which says, "They shall put you out of the synagogues [out of the church, out of the fellowship within a church]; yes the time comes that whosoever kills you [is that evil?] will think that he does God service."

According to the last phrase of that verse, a person can kill somebody and think that he is doing an act of worship. It is interesting that a conscience can be so educated as to allow a person to do something that is terribly evil and think that he is actually worshipping God in doing it.

Are there not religions, are there not lands, are there not people in the world who feel that they are able to, let us say, earn themselves points, or to feel good about putting others to death? I am thinking of those who are part of the Islamic faith. In putting down the infidel (as they look at it), they think they do God service, and believe this act earns them a higher place in paradise.

What is really perverse is that Jesus uttered this in the light of people who were well aware of Christianity—that they put them out of the synagogue. "Synagogue" is associated with Judaism, and He is speaking to Christian people, and so here He is talking about people who have knowledge of *the way*, who think they are doing God service.

Did this happen in the Inquisition? Did not people who claimed to be Christian put to death other people who were claiming to be Christian, and think they did God service? The conscience had been twisted to such a position, to such a level, that allowed them to do that. We need to think about this because we are moving toward a time in which this is going to be repeated once again, and in far greater intensity.

The fourth point, counter-poised against that thought, is something that is found in Titus 1:15. This one is particularly chilling in its ramifications.

Titus 1:15 To the pure all things are pure: but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled.

The implication here is that a true Christian's conscience can become defiled as well. We are dealing with something that is strictly from the world (having a defiled conscience), but the Christian's conscience can become contaminated or defiled. The conscience will adjust in the direction that it is exercised. That is a truism.

I think you understand this is true. A person can begin a pattern of sin with a feeling of horror, with a sharp feeling of remorse and shame about what he has done, or maybe what he is contemplating doing. If the sin is entered into, and if the sin is continued, the conscience begins to adjust its feelings. Its intensity becomes less and less until finally the person is the slave of what he formerly felt great remorse about doing, and he is helpless before its onslaught. So you see, even the conscience of a Christian can adjust. Paul gives us this warning in Hebrews 3.

Hebrews 3:12-15 Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort

one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

This is especially interesting because the people to whom this was originally written were not violently rebelling against God. That is very clear from the context of the whole book. Rather, they were drifting away through neglect. Hebrews 2 tells us what will happen to us if we neglect so great salvation. They did not hate God. They were drifting away.

These people were neglecting their salvation. If they were material in the sense of something that was sitting out in a field, we would say they were oxidizing away. They were rusting away, as far as their Christianity was concerned, because they were not maintaining it, let alone growing within it. Their lives, their conscience, their heart was gradually becoming hardened.

Slowly but surely, the feeling of intensity they had about right and wrong was slipping away from them and was becoming hardened against the deceitfulness of sin. The heart, and therefore the conscience, will adjust to the place where it becomes so hardened that repentance is impossible. We might say today that a person in this state is becoming "inured" to sin, and no longer cares. The word "inured" means "to accustom, to accept something undesirable." Its root is the French word for work. Are you beginning to get the drift? What was undesirable was work.

A lot of people do not like to work. They look upon it in their attitude as a necessary evil that must be done, and so they harden themselves to the fact it must be done, and they go do it. That is one attitude a person can have towards work, but it is an attitude one should not have. In our case, it is sin and its effect that is undesirable. But human nature, which is still in us with its enmity towards God, looks upon sin as desirable. We have a choice here. If we give in to human nature, it will gradually accustom the heart and conscience to sin through character until we no longer care. We will be inured.

You will recall God's frequent references in the Old Testament to Israel being stiffnecked, or having hardness of heart. Having one's conscience hardened is another way of speaking the same thing. However, to those under the New Covenant, it is far more dangerous. Indeed, it is the ultimate in departing from God.

We are going to string several scriptures together to get a better picture of what can happen to one's conscience, and why it is so important.

Hebrews 8:7-13 For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, he says: Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in my covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. None of them shall teach his neighbor and none his brother, saying, know the LORD, for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more. In that He says, A new covenant, He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

I read all of those verses because that was lifted right out of Jeremiah 31 in the Old Testament. It was a promise at that time—a prophecy of something God was going to do for the people of Israel eventually.

In verse 7 we find that there was a fault—a flaw, as it were—in the Old Covenant. In reality, I think we can understand that nothing God does ever has a flaw in it. There was nothing wrong with the Old Covenant. Every good and perfect gift comes from the Father of lights above.

The Old Covenant was a good deal. No nation ever had such a good deal handed to them. The God of heaven made an agreement with Israel to prosper them, to protect them, to provide for them in every way, and to fight for them. All they had to do was to submit to His law. But there was something wrong in the relationship, something wrong in that the Old Covenant could not cover where the problem was.

Romans 8:3 For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh.

The problem in the relationship was not in reality in the Old Covenant. The problem was in the people. The Old Covenant simply could not cover the weakness that was within the people. God never intended it. It was an exercise that proves to be an instruction for you and me. The peoples' experience under the Old Covenant did not produce a good relationship with God. God tells us where the problem was.

In Deuteronomy 29:4, God says that He had not given them a spirit that gave them the ability to understand. The relationship could not then be what God was going to have with His people under the New Covenant. It was a pattern of what was to come. We just read in Hebrews 8 what was to come. What was to come was a better covenant with better promises.

We are going to go to Hebrews 8:5 because I want to prove to you that the Old Covenant was just a pattern.

Hebrews 8:5-6 Who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain. But now He [Christ] has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises.

Remember, this is connected to conscience. This is connected to the defiling of the conscience, or the state of a person's conscience.

In Ezekiel 36, God is talking through Ezekiel about what is yet to come. Jeremiah 31 speaks of a covenant that He is going to make with Israel. We have already been drawn into that covenant. The time is coming when He is going to make that New Covenant with a political entity.

Ezekiel 36:24-27 For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. [Think about a defiled, contaminated conscience.] I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.

We have already been drawn into a part of the New Covenant, in God's preparations for the fulfillment of this very prophecy. This is so that we can be prepared to work with Christ when this time He is speaking of in Ezekiel 36 begins to occur.

I want you to notice that the primary feature of this New Covenant is the change in the people's heart. It is a change in their mind, in their conscience, from one that is hard, from one that is defiled, from one that is contaminated, from one that is resistant to truth, from one that is stone-like, to one that is soft, to one that is sensitive, to one that is pliable, to one that is merciful, to one that is kind, to one that is generous, to one that is concerned, to one that is humble, to one that is God-centered rather than self-centered.

What is He talking about here? He is talking about conversion. What is conversion? Conversion includes the change from a stony heart to a soft heart, a heart that is tender. He is speaking of the softening of a heart, the removal of the obduracy toward God and the way of God, making it possible for a person to be sensitive and concerned about submitting to God. Is this world concerned and sensitive about submitting to God? You know from your own experience that it is not, except in a very general way.

With this thought in mind we are going to go back to the New Testament to Ephesians 4:17. In my Bible this paragraph is titled "The New Man." Think of this in terms of this change of heart. Think of this subject of conversion—this subject that governs a person's feelings about morality, a person's feelings about ethics, a person's feelings about what is right and what is wrong, what is righteousness and what is evil. Paul wrote this to a mixed congregation of Gentiles and Israelites.

We are not in quite the same type of situation today. In its spiritual sense, a Gentile is the opposite of a Jew. Who is a Jew? Romans 2 and 3 says a Jew is a person who is converted. A Gentile is simply the unconverted. So what is the New Man? The New Man is a spiritual Jew. He is in the process of conversion. His heart, his mind, is being changed.

Ephesians 4:17-18 This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk [conduct your life] as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God.

Is a person who is alienated from God sensitive to God? Is his life centered on God? Is his life, is his heart, is his conscience hardened toward God? Does he care about God's law? Only marginally, at best. It is not really a part of his life. That person's mind is hardened. What do you expect that person's conscience is going to be like? Is it going to be the same as the converted person's conscience? Impossible! It cannot be, because by the miracle of conversion the converted person's mind, his heart, his sensitivity toward God, has been softened.

Remember this true principle, that a conscience, converted or unconverted, will progress in the direction that it is exercised. It will intensify toward evil, or it will intensify toward good, depending on the way it is exercised. Can you understand why there is so much in the Bible about being righteous?

If we are growing in conversion, our conscience is going to become ever more sensitive about right and wrong. It is going to become ever more tender. That conscience is never condemned by an action which we do, because the converted person will understand that the conscience is going to

adjust in the direction it is exercised. If it is exercised in the wrong direction, what is going to happen? Your conscience is going to condemn you for what you allowed yourself to do. We are going to see how important this is in a little bit.

Ephesians 4:18 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.

What did we say at the beginning that conscience is dependent upon? It is dependent upon education and experience, and how it is exercised. Their minds are alienated and darkened because of the ignorance that is in them because of the hardening of their heart. Verse 19 gives a warning from the apostle about why we had better exercise our conscience in the right direction.

Ephesians 4:19 Who, being past feeling....

Look how far this has gone. That is how far conscience will adjust. This is a warning to Christians that this can occur. When a person has committed the unpardonable sin, he is past feeling. He cannot repent. If a person feels he has committed the unpardonable sin, it is very likely that he has not because his conscience would not give him that feeling if he were past feeling. He would not care.

Ephesians 4:19-20 Who, being past feeling have given themselves over to licentiousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But you have not so learned Christ.

Here again is education. Conversion is an educational process, but it is an educational process in the right things. If we are not being educated in the right things, the conscience will adjust to the wrong things. Conscience is not something God can put into a person by fiat.

Ephesians 4:21-22 If indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts.

We have to make choices. We are going to grow one way or the other. Our liberty in Christ is that we have been put in a position where we can make the choice. That is our liberty. Those in the world are not free to make that choice.

Ephesians 4:22-24 That you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness.

Through this process of conversion, it is our responsibility to make effort to put off the old man by changing conduct because the conscience will follow. It will go in the direction of the conduct. If we make the effort to do those things, then we will be renewed in our mind, and the conscience will follow right along. Here are some of the specific things we have to do:

Ephesians 4:25-27 Therefore, putting away lying, each one speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another. Be angry, and do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil.

Ephesians 4:29 Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth.

Ephesians 4:30-32 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you.

Do you know what that actually says in the Greek? It says "Be sweet." Be *sweet* to one another and tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you.

Ephesians 5:1-2 Therefore be followers of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling aroma.

This little summary is telling us that none of these changes will take place unless we battle against the conscience we brought with us from the world. That is going to take sacrifice. Just like Christ sacrificed His life, we are going to have to sacrifice our life as well.

So here is where we stand. We were born into this world with no knowledge. What we are and what we feel was formed by association with family, school, church, friends, employers, college, books, and fashions. All of these largely came out of this world, but all of these things have to be brought under review, and there has to be change.

God calls this world "confusion [Babylon] the great." It is a system He describes in simple terms as being "drunk with the wine of the wrath of the great whore's fornication." I challenge you to look anywhere you want in the world at the result of this world's moral judgments. They are failing. Can you understand that a drunk's judgments cannot be trusted? That is such a simple picture. You cannot trust a drunk's judgments.

I remember an astounding statistic I heard over WIS in Columbia when we were there in the early 1980s. They said, according to police records of motor vehicle arrests made in the state of South Carolina, that after six o'clock in the evening, one out of every three people was under the influence of either heroin, cocaine, marijuana, alcohol, or medication, so that their judgment was impaired.

That was just one state. Thirty-three percent of the drivers were impaired in some way. Could their judgment be trusted? It is very likely the reason why

they were arrested is that they did something to attract the patrolman's attention. It was probably something weird, something strange, or something which gave evidence of very poor judgment.

We are going to look at this from God's perspective. He sees the whole world under the influence. Can their judgments be trusted? Can their feelings about what is right and wrong be trusted? Absolutely not! Any of you who have had too much alcohol, you know how your feelings change under the influence. The conscience is usually released of its inhibitions and the real personality comes out, and it is usually not very pretty.

Imagine what it looks like to God. He weeps over it. You can see there has to be massive changes in our thinking. This issue of conscience is no little thing. It is very important as to whether or not we are ever going to be in the image of God.

We are to be made new. We are to be renewed in our minds. It is a process, and as we progress, the conscience will undergo a multitude of changes because the values are changing. There must be a radical re-orientation of our minds if we are ever going to be in the image of God.

Job 27:5-6 Far be it from me that I should say you are right; till I die I will not put away my integrity from me. My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go; my heart shall not reproach me as long as I live.

What a boastful statement that was! Now much of what Job said was pretty much true. God admitted that Job was a righteous man. For God to admit that Job was an upright person, that is pretty high praise. Job was a pretty good fellow. He was a wonderful citizen—the kind of next-door neighbor anybody would like. By Job's own estimation, he felt that he was really a balanced personality. But to God, Job was staggering all over the place in a drunkenness that he was not even aware of.

We have to be aware we were born into a culture, and that this culture pretty much determined what we are. Maybe by that culture's standards we might be a very good citizen, a good person. I am sure that is the way Job was looking at it. By comparison to those around him, Job was a very good man,

but at the end of the story, what did he say? He said, "I hate myself. I abhor myself. I repent in dust and ashes." He said he spoke about things he did not understand. He began to see things from God's perspective, and his heart, his conscience, was smitten because he recognized that, compared to God, he was absolutely, in everything, filthy.

So what are we going to compare ourselves against? It is a choice with which we are confronted. We have to recognize that we have been developed and educated in a culture that is obsessed with self-satisfaction, and this cannot help but bring people into conflict. It creates offense and division because each one's sense of right and wrong is telling him that he has every right to exercise himself in order to satisfy his desire. The Bible says this is not so, this is not right.

In the Bible, the community is generally seen as more important than the individual. In other words, the family is more important than the individual member. Whether it is the church, the state, or all the way up to the nation, the body of people is more important than the individual member or citizen. That is the way the Bible looks at it. There is a very clear reason behind all of this instruction, because the Bible assumes that God is the unseen Hand that is actually ruling over all. Whether it is the family, the church, or the nation, the Bible presents God as Ruler. Therefore everything is in good hands, is it not?

If a person sees God actively ruling, then he knows by faith that all things work together for good, and that the momentary satisfaction one might get from the fulfilling of his desire is not what life is all about. In the United States, we have been taught otherwise. The government and the social system in the United States are structured so that it—society and even the government—have to conform to the satisfaction of individuals and minorities.

The priority that we see in the United States today is not what it used to be. Back in colonial times the priority was actually weighted in the other direction, more to a biblical fashion where the community was more important than the individual. However, as time has progressed more toward the end, the individual becomes increasingly more important and is able to exercise his prerogative in spite of what society might want.

It has gotten so bad in the United States that now juries are finding it difficult to condemn murderers because individual rights have become so important. The individual is able to exercise his conscience—his values about right and wrong. The jury finds them essentially innocent. Can you see what this is going to do? We are going to have absolute chaos before this is all over because individuals do not feel it is necessary to conform to the demands of the whole. They want to exercise their own prerogative. Their conscience is telling them that it is okay.

The Civil War—a major war in the United States—was fought over this very issue. It was the most devastating war we had ever been in. The real issue there was money. The real issue was tariffs. On the political scene, the real issue was whether individual or state's rights were going to be supreme over federal right. In this case the federal right came out supreme. Today I do not think it would go that way.

Here in the church, we are becoming distorted about right and wrong. I have heard of people in the church claiming that a lie is not a lie if the person who is telling it does not know it is a lie. Now that is not so. It is like saying that if one does not know that two plus two equals five, then it is not wrong.

Why would a person say that if a person does not know that it is a lie? Well, because his conscience is telling him that he did no wrong because it was not his intention to deceive. The conscience of the person telling the lie may not be damaged because of his sincerity and ignorance, but the one hearing the lie is still misled. The conscience of the person telling the lie may not be damaged, but the act still is not righteous. It is no more righteous than two plus two equals five, if it is going to lead someone to the wrong conclusion. You might think Ritenbaugh has gone out on a limb here. No I have not.

I John 5:17 All unrighteousness is sin.

All unrighteousness is sin. Modern translations usually translate it "All wrongdoing is sin." the word, "sin," there is the Greek *harmartia*. What does that word literally mean? It means to miss the mark. Let us feed that back into the definition. "All unrighteousness is missing the mark." Two plus two equals five does not quite make it. It missed the mark.

We need to broaden our understanding of sin from its basic definition of being the transgression of God's law. It is very interesting that in the New Testament, where maybe we are especially concerned about the peculiarities or the complexities or the specifics of sin, God uses words that are extremely broad in their application. The two most frequently used ones are *harmartia* and *paraptoma*. *Harmartia* means "to miss the mark." *Paraptoma* means simply "to turn aside." The mark that is missed is the way God would do it. In other words, righteousness is the way that God would do it. When we begin to understand this, it ought to be humbling to us, and therefore beneficial to us to have the right concept of perfection.

Sin is not limited to things done deliberately, or to things that we can specifically say are lawbreaking. Sin is "missing the mark." The Bible approaches moral issues as being black or white. There is almost no middle ground. This is the reason why the Bible says that love covers a multitude of sin.

The Bible also says that not all sin brings death. That ought to be comforting, because we have the tendency to make the definition of sin so narrow that we actually begin to think every little transgression is going to bring death. Not so. That is not the way God is. He is not waiting there to whack us with a cleaver and cut off our head just because we committed a sin. God is interested in the trajectory of our life, as to whether we are growing and overcoming, not whether we are occasionally committing a sin.

Not every sin is unto death. You who are parents can understand that. Every transgression of your child of your household laws does not bring upon the death penalty. There might be some disappointment, but you see your children making progress, and you are still pleased even though they transgressed. That is the way God is.

We are going to continue to look at this. Isaiah 55 has much to do with changing, adjusting a person's conscience, which is very important to God. As we become more in the image of God, and the conscience adjusts, it is going to increasingly become more sensitive to what is right and what is wrong.

Isaiah 55:8-9 For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.

Think of this in terms of Job. Job thought he was a pretty good guy, but from God's perspective, Job was staggering around drunk. That is the way we are toward God. God's standards are exceedingly higher than ours, but this is the direction we are being formed and shaped into. We are being shaped into His image.

As we grow, as we change, as we are educated, as we have experience with God, the conscience is going to adjust. It is going to adjust in the area it is exercised. If it is exercised in the right area, we are going to find that we are going to become increasingly sensitive to right and wrong from God's perspective. If we are not, we will become inured (hardened) and be moving in the other direction, because the conscience will adjust in that direction.

If we are ever going to be in the image of God, it is going to be our responsibility to go in that direction. If we do, the conscience will change. That is wonderful, good news. It will adjust. Did you ever wonder why, when we get into the Kingdom of God that we are not going to sin? Our consciousness of sin will be so sharp that we will not touch it with a hundred-million-mile-long pole. The experiences of life that God is leading us through will adjust it in that direction.

Psalms 119:172 My tongue shall speak of Your word, for all Your commandments are righteousness.

The Hebrew word here for righteousness is *tsedeq*. Phonetically it's *tsawdak*. It gives one the picture of equity—something that is even, something that is equal of a scale that is in equal poise. It is in perfect balance. It is very interesting that the Greek word translated "righteousness" in the New Testament means virtually the same thing. It is *dikaio* in the Greek, and it means "to divide." It means equity. It means to divide to each his due. It means perfect balance. We have two words here that mean essentially the

same thing, and He is saying here that all His commandments—not just the Ten Commandments—but the statutes, the judgments, the customs, the rituals, and all instruction in general are righteousness.

That word "commandments" is a word you are familiar with in the Hebrew. You have probably said it many times in your life. It is the word "mitzvah." A Jewish person has a bar mitzvah. When a person makes his bar mitzvah, he becomes a son (a bar) of the commandment. Now it means "commandment" in a general sense, in a broad sense, and is used even in the Bible to indicate the Torah, even though there is a separate word *Torah*. *Torah* means law or instruction. You put this all together, and when He says all His commandments are righteousness, it means all of His instruction is righteousness.

I am giving this to you so you will understand that right doing (righteousness) is not confined to law. There are things having to do with life that do not touch on law, that God has no "Thus saith the LORD," but He does have examples He gives of things that are right.

In Genesis 18 God tells in a very short verse why He called Abraham.

Genesis 18:19 For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.

God is saying, "I have an intimate relationship with Abraham so that he may teach his household, his children, to keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him."

The way of God is a way of living. It is not confined merely to law. Righteousness is right doing. It is doing things the way God would do it if God were in the situation that you are in. Sin therefore is a turning aside. It is missing the mark of the way God would do it if He were in your shoes. Christ did it so perfectly that He said, "If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father." "If the Father were here, He would do it exactly the way I did."

We have to follow after Christ the same way, and as you can see, we are going through a process of learning righteousness. As we learn righteousness and as we put it into practice, then God's righteousness becomes the level of our conscience. It will manipulate or adjust the feelings we have about things whether our conscience will permit or deny us to do what we feel we should do. So righteousness is more than just law. It is doing things the way God would do them.

In Romans 14, we have a practical application of something that happened within a congregation. Paul is instructing here regarding a situation in which tensions resulted. Division was taking place, and offense had occurred because of peoples' varying levels of convictions about certain conduct. In this case, the tensions resulted from whether one could eat foods offered to an idol. In our case, it could involve maybe calendar issues.

Our fellowship within the church should be marked by a unity, a common spirit, a single purpose. However, that in no way means we will be unanimous in the way we look at things. Unity does not imply robot-like minds. That is not what God is interested in. To have such a view would be naïve. It cannot be that way because our understanding is at different levels. If we were talking about a school, would you expect a second-grader to have the same approach to things as a senior? Of course not. The same principle is at work in the church.

We come from different backgrounds. We have different abilities. God has given us different gifts. Some people grasp certain concepts more quickly. Sometimes these differences create tension, and sometimes even offense. We should expect that there will be diversities, but this does sometimes create a major test of our love. Remember, love covers a multitude of sin, not necessarily law breaking, not necessarily a sin unto death, but it can cover the missing of the mark, the turning aside that did not involve sin—the breaking of God's law; a sin that might be unto death.

Romans 14:1 says, "Receive one who is weak in the faith."

Do you know who the "weak in the faith" are? It is somebody who has not grasped yet what Christianity really means. This person may be quite intelligent. To this person, Christianity may exist only in the world of study and of religious technicalities.

Romans 14:17-20 For the kingdom of God is not food and drink [it is not the understanding of a technicality about something], but righteousness [right doing] and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men. Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense.

By contrast, the strong Christian is one who sees what is important morally, spiritually, ethically, and is able to discern between what is important and what is not important. He is prepared to do the right thing no matter which way he will go. The weak, on the other hand, are preoccupied with some matters to such an extent that they assume an importance all out of proportion to their real value.

Romans 14:1 Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things.

Verse 1 here is telling us not to even force the truth upon others. He simply says receive them. If you will compare Romans 14 with I Corinthians 8 through 10, you will find that the subject matter is virtually identical. A comparison of the two will show you that the apostle Paul theologically was in agreement with the ones who were wrong in what they did. Theologically they were correct, but what they did was unrighteous even though it was based upon their conviction about something that was right. An interesting case indeed. The parties who were doing the offending were the ones who were theologically correct, and Paul said they were sinning.

Romans 14:4 Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.

Paul says we are to be slow to judge those who differ, because on this basis they are ultimately not answerable to us for the standard that their conscience lays on them. They are answerable to God.

You might wonder how this applies to recent circumstances in this church. Let me tell you something. I did not disfellowship anybody until after they had already committed themselves and separated from the body by their own choice. I merely confirmed their choice, that they wanted to separate from us in an area of doctrine that was non-negotiable.

In Romans 14 and in I Corinthians, the difference was in the acceptance and obedience of individuals to something that was already approved by the church. Understand we are not free to practice Christianity on our own terms. The Bible makes that very clear, because what that will result in is anarchy—everybody doing what is right in their own eyes. Then would we have division!

Romans 14:5 One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.

Verse 5 is telling us each person must become convicted that his approach is right, and that vague or second-hand convictions are of little help and are no substitute for clear understanding. That is something that has to grow in us. The reason for the struggle in the weak brother is either a lack of understanding or a lack of conviction about the rightness or wrongness of a thing.

Romans 14:7-13 For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For

to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living. But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written: "As I live, says the LORD, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way.

It is our responsibility to the church community to understand that we are answerable to God for how we act toward our brother even though we have the truth. We do not live to ourselves. Remember I said to you the Bible approaches things from the perspective that the community is greater and more important and has greater priority than the individual. The reason for that is that as an act of faith we see God as ruling over all. We are indeed answerable first to God, but we are not to be insensitive to our brother's feelings about things. Paul calls that judging and being contemptuous.

In Romans 14 Paul gets to the specific subject of food offered to idols, that it was sold to the markets by the pagan priests. The subject is not clean or unclean foods. You see, "clean or unclean" would have been non-negotiable. God's Word says we are talking about clean foods that were ceremonially defiled by coming in contact with dirty hands, or dirty spiritual hands—the priests', the idol.

In I Corinthians 8 Paul says the idol was nothing, and therefore we are free to eat, but we are not free to flaunt our liberty before a weak brother. That point is negotiable. The "clean and unclean" is not negotiable, because God's Word there has a "Thus says the Lord." If a brother is offended because you have flaunted your liberty, it is not a righteous act. It is not love.

One may be free to do a lawful act, but to do so at the risk of offense or division is to lose all sense of proportion and fall into an error at least as bad as the weak brother has when one exalts an option into a necessary religious principle. In other words, we have to do it because it is right. The only

person who is free is the one who does what is wisest. So in I Corinthians 8:13 Paul said, "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble."

Paul had a tender conscience. What an acute sense of right and wrong he had! His brother's feelings were so important to him that he would deny himself his lawful right to eat meat or food offered to an idol if it was going to offend his brother. That is a conscience that is really sensitive and concerned and other-centered. In Romans 14:19 he begins to make the practical application.

Romans 14:19 Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.

Paul does not challenge the Christian's liberty to follow his conviction, but he does insist that our liberty must always be exercised with proper reference to its effect on others. The Christian has to ask himself, "If I do this, what will the consequences be? Is it going to build the congregation, or is it going to divide it?" Paul is saying that we cannot afford to be careless, because that may turn out to be unrighteous even though it does not break a law. It will be sin even though it is not the breaking of a commandment.

In verse 20 Paul concedes that the strong are correct as far as the religious truth is concerned, but this does not end the issue because in addition to finding truth, the Christian must also discover how it can be specifically applied in a spirit of love for the welfare of others.

Romans 14:20 Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense.

If one is loyal to a conviction it does enable him to retain his integrity. We must understand that following our conscience does not make the act righteous. The act is righteous only if it also agrees with what God would do. That is what Romans 14 is about. That is what I Corinthians 8 through 10 is about. That discussion in I Corinthians 8 through 10 does not end until

chapter 13, and you know what chapter 13 is. It is the love chapter. Chapter 13 is Paul's answer to I Corinthians 8 through 10. Love covers a multitude of sin.

The function of one's conscience is to decide whether laws, acts, or things are inconsistent with divine law. To go against that would be destructive to character.