



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics)
Lesson 4.13 – The Doctrine of Human Beings and Sin

The Conscience

The apostle Paul taught the Christians in Rome that everyone in the whole world has a conscience and an awareness of a divine being to whom he or she is accountable. These are his words: **“When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things 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”** (Romans 2:14-15). The Gentiles did not have the written law of God given to the Jewish people, which is summarized in the Ten Commandments. Nevertheless, the Gentiles, or non-Jews, had the moral law of God written in their hearts, so that they had some kind of knowledge of right and wrong. Often, they were as moral as the Jews, because they were obeying the law written in their hearts.

At the same time the Gentiles had an awareness of a divine being to whom they would have to give an answer for how they lived their lives. They had a consciousness of someone in authority or control over them. Because of the law of God written in their hearts and their consciousness of a divine being, their thoughts accused them when they believed they had done wrong, and their thoughts excused them when they thought they had done right. For this reason, the apostle wrote that even the Gentiles know **“the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things (evil things as listed in the verses preceding) are deserving of death”** and yet at the same time **“not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them”** (Romans 1:32).

The conscience of unbelievers is guided by their understanding of God’s requirements, but this understanding may not be fully in line with God’s Word. The conscience of believers should be guided entirely by God’s will as revealed in Scripture, but this is not always the case because of poor training or because of the desires of the flesh.

The Bible speaks of persons having a bad conscience or a good conscience. In his defense of his life before Governor Felix, the apostle Paul said: **“I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men”** (Acts 24:16). Paul strove to live in such a way that he did not feel in his conscience that he was living contrary to the two tables of God’s law: love for God and love for his fellowman. On the other hand, Paul told his assistant Timothy that there were false teachers who were **“speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving”** (1 Timothy 4:2-3). By our continued sinning against our conscience, we can get to the point where our sinning no longer bothers us. We can begin to convince ourselves that our sins are not really sins at all; our conscience no longer functions as it should.

The fact that all human beings have a conscience of some kind gives missionaries a place from which to begin their presentation of salvation in Jesus Christ to those who do not know Jesus. Before the message of salvation can be good news to a sinner, the sinner must first realize that he is a sinner and that he has not lived up to the law of God written in his heart. He must realize that he is in deep trouble with God, whom he must face and to whom he must give account when he dies. In other words, when a missionary teaches God’s law to an unbeliever and tries to make him aware of his sin and his need for a Savior, the voice of conscience within that unbeliever and his accusing thoughts are at least in partial agreement with the law of God. The sinner recognizes that what the missionary is saying about

his sin and guilt is correct because it agrees with his own feeling of guilt. The fact that unbelievers often have a guilty conscience has led people from many different cultures try to make up for their feelings of guilt by bringing some kind of atoning sacrifice to the gods, or by following some code of behavior that they believe will be pleasing to the gods.

All attempts on the part of unbelievers to placate an angry God or gods always fall short. There is no way a person can truly have a good conscience rather than a bad or evil conscience apart from the fully atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Even the animal sacrifices God Himself commanded the Israelites to bring to Him did not take away sin. Their value was as a preview of the one bloody sacrifice of the Son of God later made on the cross. The fact that the animal sacrifices had to be repeated day after day, year after year, proves that they did not remove sin and guilt. **“For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins”** (Hebrews 10:4).

The atoning sacrifice of Christ, however, had to be made only once. **“Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption”** (Hebrews 9:12). Christ’s sacrifice is how our conscience is cleansed **“from dead works to serve the living God”** (Hebrews 9:14). **“Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus... let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water”** (Hebrews 10:19-22). Putting our trust in Jesus, we know our sins are forgiven, and our conscience no longer bothers us; we are no longer afraid of God nor of facing His judgment on the Last Day. **“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”** (Romans 5:1).

A good conscience through faith in Christ can again become a bad conscience when we knowingly follow a path that is displeasing to God. That is why our whole life must be a life of repentance in which we confess our daily sins and again turn to Jesus for forgiveness. We Christians need God’s law every day to remind us that we are sinners, and we need God’s Gospel every day to assure us that our sins are forgiven and that we are safe from God’s judgment.

The conscience of unbelievers and even believers may be misguided. A person may be led to believe that God-pleasing behavior is not God-pleasing, or that a certain sinful behavior is God-pleasing. For example, if a person has been told all his life that praying to an idol or to a godly person who has died is good, he may feel guilty when he no longer prays to that idol or that saint. If he prays to Mary, for example, he is sinning against God, because God says we should pray only to the Triune God. On the other hand, if he stops praying to Mary, he is sinning against his conscience, because he still believes in his heart that it is right to pray to Mary. The solution to this problem is to let our conscience be guided by God’s Word. This involves a process of Christian training and education – studying God’s Word carefully so that we are sure of what is right and wrong.

In the days of the New Testament there were many Christians who believed that eating certain foods was wrong. Their conscience would bother them if they ate such foods. The Bible calls such Christians weak Christians because they believed something was sinful that was not really sinful. There were others who believed it was sinful to work on Saturdays, because the Old Testament law forbid work on the Sabbath. How did the apostle Paul handle such situations? One thing he did was to establish whether such activities were sinful or not. For example, he wrote to the Christians in Colossi: **“Let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ... Why...do you subject yourselves to regulations – ‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,’ which all concern things which perish with the using – according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh”** (Colossians 2:16-23).

The truth is then that God does not now make the eating or non-eating of certain foods a matter of conscience, that is, a matter of right and wrong. God does not now make the observance of the

Sabbath or other religious festivals a matter of conscience – a matter of right and wrong. We are free to worship on any day of the week. We are free to eat all foods or not eat them, as we please. We should not make rules about such matters and insist that everyone must obey such rules. Following such rules may make us look especially pious and holy to the world but has no value in the struggle against real sin.

Nevertheless, Paul was careful in his instruction to tell the strong Christians (the ones who knew that these things were not sinful) that they should not do anything to lead the weak Christians (the ones who thought these things were wrong) to sin against their consciences. For a full discussion of these matters read 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14-15. It may very well be that in bringing Christian teaching into cultures that are accustomed to many such rules that are not rules of God, Christian missionaries may have to forgo certain activities that are not wrong in themselves so as to avoid leading others to sin against their conscience. At the same time, it is necessary for these missionaries to begin the process of teaching God's Word, so that the people will gradually come to know what is truly God-pleasing and what is not God-pleasing.

Questions

1. How do we know that Gentiles as well as Jews have a conscience?
2. What is conscience?
3. What does it mean that the law of God is written in men's hearts?
4. What is a good conscience and what is a bad conscience?
5. Why does the fact that everyone has a conscience help the missionary?
6. What does everyone need to know before he can appreciate the Gospel?
7. What is the only right way for a bad conscience to become a good conscience?
8. What is the only way a sinner can have true peace with God?
9. What is the difference between strong Christians and weak Christians?
10. What does God's Word say about food laws and special days of worship?
11. How should strong Christians behave in the presence of weak Christians?
12. What is the only way we can determine what is truly God-pleasing?
13. List some things that many people in your locale think are wrong but which actually may not be wrong.
14. How would you proceed in dealing with these people?