

A Good Conscience or Fear

From First Peter

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As we continue this morning our look at 1 Peter, we should be reminded that Peter is anxious for us as Christians to be zealous for good works. In verse 13 he says, "Who is there to harm you if you prove zealous for what is good?" Peter assumes that the answer to this question is no one, but Peter also knows that fear, fear of being intimidated, fear of being slandered, fear of being reviled may very well keep us from doing good. And so Peter exhorts us in this fashion in verse 14, "And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled." Then Peter goes on to give us the answer to fear, that comes in verse 15, "Do not fear," Peter says, "but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts." The answer to fear is the Lord Jesus Christ. The answer to fear is the Lord Jesus Christ and recognizing his absolute sovereignty as Lord over everything that comes to pass.

So Peter very simply says "sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts," but Peter does not stop there, he gives us two very concrete ways in which we may sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts. You may sanctify Christ as Lord in your heart by "being always ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account of the hope that is in you," Peter says in verse 15. You may sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts by being ready to defend your faith and then, secondly, you may sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, verse 16, by having "a good conscience," and it's the second way of sanctifying Christ as Lord in your heart that draws our attention this morning. We see, first of all, in verse 16, that Peter speaks of having a good conscience and then, secondly, we see that Peter gives the purpose for having a good conscience. Verse 16, "and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame." But then, third, as we apply our text, we see that in this particular teaching of Peter we have a profoundly practical lesson in Christianity.

Let's look at the first point, then, the fact that Peter speaks of having a good conscience. To understand what Peter is talking about, we, of course, must understand or define conscience. The word conscience itself means to know with. To know with. Conscience is knowledge, standing alongside of, or standing with certain actions or behavior. Conscience is, therefore, a human capability for self-evaluation. In Romans 2:15 the Apostle Paul speaks of conscience bearing witness, that is, conscience bears witness for or against our actions or our thoughts. Conscience is the knowledge which stands alongside of our thoughts and actions and either agrees or disagrees with those thoughts

or actions. And you know very well that when we do something, conscience will either say, "Yes, that is good," or, "No, that is bad." Conscience is that part of every human being that makes him or her a moral being, you see. Conscience is the natural ability within us that makes us say yes or no about our thoughts and actions. In fact, because of conscience and because conscience is an integral part of every human being, a human being cannot help but make these distinctions and say yes or no with regards to deeds or actions.

But now as we look at our text this morning, we see that the Apostle Peter speaks of a good conscience. What is a good conscience and, in contrast, what is a bad conscience? Well, I think the best way to define a good conscience is with reference to Adam. When God created Adam, he, of course, created Adam with a conscience, and when God looked at everything that he created, he said that it was very good and this meant that Adam was good, it also meant that Adam's conscience was good.

Now such a conscience coming from the hand of Almighty God would be in agreement with God. A good conscience would be in agreement with a good God and this was the case with Adam. A good conscience, therefore, says yes when God says yes, and no when God says no. But on the other side, the Bible also teaches us what a bad conscience is. In Titus 1:15, the Apostle Paul says this, "to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled." We see here that the conscience of the unbelieving sinner is defiled. Paul describes this defilement of conscience when he speaks to Timothy and talks about men who speaking lies in hypocrisy have their conscience seared with a hot iron. Sins, in other words, like lying and hypocrisy defile the conscience and what Paul says is that sins like lying and hypocrisy leave a mark on the conscience like a hot branding iron sears the flesh of an animal and leaves the mark of a brand, and every brand of sin leaves its own peculiar mark on the conscience and a branded, seared, defiled conscience will not respond to God properly but respond positively to particular sins. A branded conscience will say yes to certain sins when God says no, you see.

Now Peter here in our text speaks of Christians having a good conscience. If you have the New American Standard Version, it says "and keep a good conscience." The King James Version reads "having a good conscience," and the reading there is better. Literally it means having a good conscience and that means, first of all, having a conscience which is cleansed from defilement, from the brand-marks of sin, and there is only one thing, there is only one thing that can cleanse a conscience from the brand-marks of sin, that's the blood of Jesus. What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Hebrews 10:22 speaks about coming to Christ and it says, "let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience." And Hebrews 9:14 says, "how much more will the blood of Christ cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" Only the conscience cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ can serve the living God. Only the conscience cleansed by the blood of Christ can begin to properly say yes where God says yes, and no where God says no. Only the conscience cleansed by Christ can be called a good conscience. And the

question must come to each one of us at this stage, I think, do you have a good conscience? Do you have a good conscience? Have you asked God to cleanse your conscience, applying the precious blood of Jesus? Have you come to Christ and received cleansing? Have you trusted Christ to cleanse your conscience from dead works and to serve the living God?

You see, the only way to have a good conscience is through the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus Christ, but having a good conscience demands keeping a good conscience too, and keeping a good conscience, in turn, demands good behavior, and I think that's one reason why Peter talks about good behavior in our text this morning. A good behavior and a good conscience go together, don't they? And as we have said before, good behavior is God-like behavior. The Lord Jesus uses the word "good" in a very amazing way when he says, "There is none good but God alone," and the adjective, the word good, ultimately describes God. Ultimately he is good and ultimately he alone is good so that good behavior, therefore, is God-like behavior, and to keep a good clear conscience means to maintain good God-like behavior. A good conscience will always say yes to good behavior, and if good behavior is not maintained, the conscience will again become defiled, you see, that is, bad behavior, sinful behavior over a period of time will result in a bad conscience, a seared conscience, a sin-branded conscience.

And so keeping a good conscience really requires maintaining good behavior, but for us to maintain absolutely good behavior, absolutely God-like behavior without ever sinning is really not possible, is it? No, it's not. And so because this is true, we are brought back to the cleansing power of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. John says in 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Ultimately, you see, having a good conscience and keeping a good conscience demands cleansing, repeated cleansing, and the sincere effort by the believer at good behavior and then further cleansing, you see.

But now let's move on in our text to the second point. Peter now adds the purpose for having a good conscience, "and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame." Peter here assumes, it seems, that the Christian will be slandered. If a person slanders you, that person speaks evil against you and that's what the King James Version says here, one speaking evil against you, that is, you will be falsely accused of evil. Slander is a form of verbal abuse, isn't it, the speaking of lies about you and to me, and it seems to me that fear really does assume that the Christian will be slandered and there is good reason for Peter to make such an assumption. The Lord Jesus himself was often slandered. The Lord Jesus was accused of being a blasphemer. The Lord Jesus was accused repeatedly of being a lawbreaker. The Lord Jesus was accused of even being demon-possessed. And the Lord Jesus said to his disciples, "If the world hated Me, the world will also hate you." And we can, therefore, expect unbelievers to speak evil about us, and we ought not to be surprised when that takes place.

Peter also expects that the Christian will be reviled. He says this also, he speaks about you being slandered and those who revile your good behavior. The word revile means to

speaking evil also and Peter here speaks of reviling your good behavior in Christ, or your conversation in Christ. Last week we talked about what it means to be in Christ a little bit, to be united with Christ. To be united with Christ means to be united with him in his death, burial and resurrection. To be united with Christ means to experience his death and his resurrection. And to be united with Christ means to have new life in Christ, and Peter speaks about good behavior in Christ. It seems to me that what Peter in essence is talking about is uniquely Christian behavior. What Peter is talking about is behavior that comes as a result of a person being united with Christ and experiencing new life. It comes as a result of a person having resurrection life within him, and that resurrection life produces good behavior, good conversation, and this is uniquely Christian behavior, therefore, that Peter is talking about because it comes as a result of a person being united with Christ. And Peter says that he expects this uniquely Christian behavior to be reviled, in other words, he expects that people will falsely accuse you, as the King James Version puts it, that is, you will be accused of having bad motives for doing good, or your good behavior itself will be called evil or malicious, and the objective will be to turn you away from the Lord Jesus Christ, the objective will be to revile you in an effort to cause you to turn away from good behavior and actually sin. And Peter, again, expects that you and I as Christians will be reviled and falsely accused, and this is exactly why Peter is interested in our having a good conscience.

Look at verse 16 now again, "and having a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame." In the very thing about which others accuse you of evil, in the very thing about which others accuse you of evil, those who revile you, Peter says, and falsely accuse you will be put to shame. Of course, all of this depends upon having a good conscience. If your conscience is cleansed by the precious blood of Christ, if your conscience is clear because you have engaged in good behavior, God will use your good behavior and when you are reviled and accused falsely, God will use that good behavior to put to shame those who speak against you, and this is why Peter urges having a good conscience, "and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame." What a tremendous thing that is.

Now we see as we apply the teaching of Peter, that having a good conscience is a very practical thing, a very practical part of true religion. From a purely personal point of view, you see, having a good conscience is very practical. A guilt-ridden conscience and fear of judgment because of sin are really awful. Guilt and fear are wretched masters and real tormentors, and nothing tears apart the soul like guilt and fear, and nothing can destroy the soul like guilt and fear but, you see, having a good conscience, having a good conscience corrects that problem, doesn't it? And the desire to have a good conscience is also good because it promotes good behavior. If you really want to have a good clear conscience, you'll avoid sin and I'll avoid sin. You and I will avoid defiling our conscience by behaving ourselves both in public and in private if we really want to have a good conscience, and promoting good behavior in this way is really good in and of itself. And then having a good conscience is the best weapon against the slanderous speech of others. You see, if your conscience is truly clear because your behavior is good, then the accusations that are made against you will always be false, right? They'll always be

invalid. They'll always be groundless. And that is the position we ought to be in, and that's why Peter says what he does in verse 16, "and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame."

What a good thing having a clear conscience is, then. It is a very practical thing and when you have been mistreated and maligned and verbally abused, having a good clear conscience is very practical, but also having a good conscience is also very practical from the standpoint of being truly Christian and seeing Christ glorified in your life. After all, you see, having a good conscience demands real dependence upon Christ. Who else can cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? Only Christ can do that. No one else but Jesus. There is no other name given among men under heaven whereby we must be saved. Only Jesus Christ. And you and I are, therefore, totally dependent upon Christ to have a clear conscience, to have a good conscience, and such absolute dependence upon Jesus Christ exalts the Lordship of Christ in your life. You see, if you are truly dependent upon Christ, you will not only receive cleansing from him but you will also follow him and obey him in order to keep a good conscience, and the result will be that you will actually serve Christ as Lord not just superficially but actually serve Christ as Lord because you really want a good conscience. Then, you see, you will be sanctifying Christ as Lord in your heart, as Peter puts it, by having a good conscience and having a good conscience will then combat the fear of doing good.

We read Romans 8 just a little bit ago. I'd like us, if we could, to turn back there to Romans 8. First of all, the very first verse in Romans 8, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Are you in Christ? Are you united to him having a good conscience? Paul says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." What a wonderful thing that is. You know, men can say all they want about you, they can revile you and lie about you all they want but they can never condemn you before God for there is now no condemnation for you before God, and if you have a good conscience, a good clear conscience, you know that's true.

Then look at Romans 8:33 and 34, "Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" Oh, dear friends in Christ, if you have a good conscience you know that nothing can separate you from the love of Christ. Who will bring a charge to God against you? No one. Who will stand up and accuse you before God if you have a clear cleansed conscience and justifiably do it? No one. What a blessing that is.

A good clear conscience before God conquers all. Look at Romans 8 again, "Just as it is written," verse 36, "'For thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us." A good clear conscience will conquer even the fear of death, and when, dear friends in Christ, you have a good clear conscience before God,

you will never fear to do that which is good, you will never fear what men will say, but you'll serve the living God for you'll have a good conscience.

Let's pray together.

Father, help each one of us this morning that we, as Your people, might have a good conscience before You and, therefore, Father, remedy the fear we may have of stepping out and doing good on Your behalf and speaking for You. Help us that by having a good conscience we might truly sanctify the Lord Jesus in our hearts as Lord and bless us to that end and, Father, cause us to go forward this morning with a good clear conscience to meet the world which is around us. Do this, we ask, in Jesus' name and for His sake. Amen.