

The Peace Of Assurance And The Conscience

Galatians 5:22

1 John 5:13

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The godly and learned Scottish Presbyterian minister, Samuel Rutherford, rightly noted:

The conscience is a tender piece, and either the best friend . . . or the saddest enemy (*A Free Disputation Against Pretended Liberty of Conscience*, p. 22, Still Waters Revival Books).

When we talk about the fruit of peace (Galatians 5:22), and particularly the peace of God within us (we have already considered peace with God in heaven), inevitably the conscience must be considered in its relationship to peace and assurance in the one who is justified by faith alone. You may ask, Because I struggle at times within my conscience over assurance of salvation, does that necessarily reveal that I am not saved? In other words, Does my inward struggle of peace of conscience necessarily reveal I have no peace with God and that I am not reconciled to God? Can I know with assurance that I have been declared righteous by God, that I have been pardoned of all my sin, that I am no longer under the condemning wrath of God, and that I have eternal life? Or is it mere wishful thinking to believe that God gives such an assurance to those who are justified by faith alone?

Oh, the heartache and torment of conscience (the rending of the wholeness of peace within) that has plagued so many professing Christians who have struggled (or do struggle) over assurance of salvation. You who are trusting in Christ alone for your eternal salvation, do you find yourselves at times in the depths of doubt and on the verge of despair as to your eternal state? Dear child of God, assurance of faith, of hope, and of eternal life is not outside the grasp of the one who trusts

alone in Christ alone as his/her only justifying righteousness before God. These are the important matters that I would like to address (by God's grace) in the sermon this Lord's Day as we continue our study on the Fruit of the Spirit, and particularly today, peace as a fruit of the Spirit.

The main points of the sermon this Lord's Day are: (1) A Biblical Description of the Conscience; and (2) A Peaceful Assurance within the Conscience (1 John 5:13).

I. A Biblical Description of the Conscience.

A. What the conscience is?

1. The conscience is a God-given faculty in man that either accuses or excuses his thoughts, words, and actions (Romans 2:14-15). The conscience acts like an internal umpire that calls us safe or out, like an internal referee that whistles that we have scored or have fouled, like an internal witness in a court of law that testifies to our innocence or guilt.

2. Before the fall of man into sin, the conscience of Adam was always a faithful witness to God's will, because it was not polluted by sin or error. However, subsequent to the fall of Adam, the conscience of man like every other faculty (intellect, emotions, and will) has been marred by sin, so that it is not a faithful witness. But when one is born again by the Spirit of God, his/her conscience (like the intellect, emotions, and will) is made alive to the Lord and finds its delight in being a faithful inward witness for the Lord. However, even in Christians the conscience may either testify falsely or testify truly depending upon the standard by which it judges (God's standard or man's standard). For you see, as the Christian grows in the grace and knowledge of Christ, his/her conscience will also be growing in judging according to the righteous standard of God's revelation. But when the conscience of even a Christian judges

according to that which is contrary to the truth and righteousness of God, it is not reliable. In other words, the conscience is not an independent judge—it is intended by God to be an inferior judge to God who alone is lord of the conscience (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 20:2), and is the supreme Judge of what is righteous and what is evil (according to the Law of Nature, Romans 1:18-20; and according to Scripture, 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

B. What the conscience is not?

1. The conscience is not an infallible pope.

a. We often and rightly condemn the alleged infallibility of the pope of Rome (in his official pronouncements). However, when we act as though our conscience has the final word in a matter, we then have an inward pope that pontificates from within (which in principle is no better than the pope who sits upon his throne and declares what is false to be true). And in this case, there is not simply one pope (which is bad enough), there are billions of popes throughout the world, because each person's conscience becomes his/her god; so that each person does what is right in his/her own eyes. With my conscience as an inward pope, I might reason that breaking the Sabbath (the Fourth Commandment) may be a sin to you, but since my conscience doesn't condemn me for doing so, it is not a sin to me. It may be wrong for you to lie, commit adultery, watch pornography, but I do not believe it is sin to me because my conscience is not offended.

(1) You see, such a view equates the lack of a guilty conscience with the lack of guilt before God. But they are not necessarily the same at all. For consider this: someone may commit a murder or commit adultery and sense no guilt at all, because his conscience has become so hardened to the truth (1 Timothy 4:2; Romans 1:21-27). And yet clearly murder and adultery incur guilt before God and justly deserve His punishment. Thus, let no one reason that merely because his/her

conscience does not experience a guilty feeling that there is no guilt that one incurs before the tribunal of the Lord when one transgresses God's Law.

(2) But on the other hand, a guilty feeling or a guilty conscience does not always mean that one has actually incurred guilt before the righteous throne of God. For example, if a mother that is driving responsibly does not swerve away quick enough to avoid a drunk driver that crosses the center median and kills her child, she may experience guilty feelings that she could have done more or that she survived but her child did not. In such a case, the mother has incurred no personal guilt before God due to some sinful irresponsibility on her part, even though she feels guilt in her conscience. In other words, the guilt we feel in our consciences may be the conviction of the Holy Spirit for some sin we have committed, or it may be the attack of Satan for no personal sin committed (we might have a very sensitive conscience that easily accepts blame anytime someone throws it our way).

(3) What is the answer to the conscience that accepts no blame or to the conscience that accepts all blame? Our conscience must not only be made alive in regeneration by the Holy Spirit (so that it delights in bearing witness to that which is faithful and true), but our conscience must also be trained and instructed through faithful reading and teaching of God's Word to judge according to God's standards (rather than according to mere man-made standards).

b. An erring, uninstructed conscience is what leads even sincere people to adamantly proclaim that all men have an inherent, God-given right, to practice whatever the religion they believe to be right according to each person's conscience (no matter how perverted that religion may be and how contrary to God commands in Scripture it may be). Such an erring conscience proclaims that everyone has his/her morality (contrary to the Moral Law of God), or that there are many ways to heaven (contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ). However, God has

never given mankind a civil/religious right to believe or practice a moral wrong (that is why God gave us the Ten Commandments as a summary of His Moral Law—declaring what are our duties which our freedom cannot lawfully violate; and that is why God gave us the Gospel—declaring there is only one way to heaven and that is through faith alone in Jesus Christ).

c. Dear ones, it is a “pretended” liberty of conscience to claim such a freedom to sin against God. True liberty of conscience is not the liberty to sin against God and His law, but the liberty to walk in loving obedience and submission to His law (James 1:25). One of the mottos and mantras for this view is this: “But he is so sincere in what he believes”, or “She believes it to be true with all her heart”. However, dear ones, we must realize that we can be sincerely wrong when our conscience leads us down the wrong path (Proverbs 14:12; Proverbs 12:15; Proverbs 16:2). Thus, let us not deceive ourselves by following what we want or desire to follow, or even what we have been taught to follow by others. Let us love Christ and His truth so much that our chief desire is to be instructed by Christ speaking infallibly through His Word.

2. The conscience is not a useless witness.

a. Because the conscience is God’s internal witness, it should not be lightly excused when it bears witness in regard to our thoughts, words, and deeds (especially when our conscience is well informed by the revelation of God in nature or in Scripture). If our conscience (as a Christian) condemns certain thoughts, attitudes, desires, ambitions, practices, words, or behavior, we shouldn’t simply say, “Oh, that is just my conscience. I don’t have to listen to it. After all, everybody else is doing it.” To the contrary, we should listen closely to our conscience (at least until it can be shown to us that our conscience has usurped the place of God and His revelation in nature or Scripture). In other words, we should not just ignore our conscience and treat it as if it was a deaf and mute witness that has nothing at all to say to us. Dear ones, part of our sanctification and growth in Christ is that of informing

and instructing our conscience concerning God's truth and righteousness throughout our Christian life.

b. Here is where counseling (not only outside the Church, but even sometimes inside the Church) often errs. In order to supposedly help a person racked with an accusing conscience, counselors may seek to ease the pain of the conscience by simply ignoring the conscience altogether and focus rather on building the person's self-esteem and not being so critical of oneself (for example, the husband/wife that commits adultery is not told by the counselor that the accusing conscience is right—that adultery is a grievous sin against God, against God's institution of marriage, and against one's spouse with whom a solemn covenant has been engaged until death do us part for which there is need of humble repentance and gracious forgiveness, but is rather told not to be so hard on oneself, after all many people have done so etc.). Just as pain in the body should not be casually ignored and dismissed (lest a bigger problem occur), so likewise pain in the conscience should not be casually ignored and dismissed (lest a bigger problem occur) .

II. A Peaceful Assurance Within The Conscience (1 John 5:13).

A. What difference does it make whether you have assurance that you have eternal life? After all, not being assured about a truth doesn't make it untrue. The uncertainty of the agnostic as to God's existence doesn't make God cease to exist.

1. If any should wonder why such a question should concern the Christian, let him simply ask a similar question concerning his/her marriage. What difference does it make whether you know with certainty that you are married? Although your lack of certainty will not mean that you are not married (if in fact you truly are married), nevertheless, you will be continually going back to the same question (over, and over, and

over again) to such an extent that this uncertainty will greatly hinder your growth in your marriage and your enjoyment of your spouse. A troubled conscience will continuously plague and riddle you if you cannot know with certainty whether this is your spouse or not. Now if certainty in marriage to your spouse is so important, then how much more significant is certainty in your spiritual union to Jesus Christ?

2. Among Papists and Arminians it is affirmed that one cannot know with certainty whether he/she is united to Christ, and to seek such an assurance is a presumptuous sin.

a. For example, the Papists at the Council of Trent denied “that anyone can know with the certainty of faith . . . that he has obtained the grace of God” (Session 6). And likewise they denied “that those, who are truly justified, ought to settle within themselves without any doubt at all, that they are justified” (Session 6). In other words, one cannot know with certainty that he has obtained the grace of God and ought not to pray for or have such a certainty. Doubt and fear of losing one’s salvation is to a large extent that which motivates the Papist to attend mass, recite the rosary, confess one’s sins to a priest, perform the penance required by the priest, and a host of other “meritorious” works. Thus, the perverse system of anguish of conscience and the inner torture of doubt as to one’s true state before God is what keeps the Romish Church going and keeps its people enslaved (contrary to 1 John 5:13).

b. How contrary to the Papist and Arminian Council of Trent is the position of the Reformed divines at the Westminster Assembly who declared,

such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God: which hope shall never make them ashamed (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 18:1).

(1) Thus, it is not the fear of losing one’s salvation

that motivates the one who embraces Christ in faith to be obedient to God, but rather a heart of love and gratitude for the abundance of grace and mercy received from the Lord. The works of love performed in obedience to God's commandments can add nothing to Christ's righteousness, which alone justifies us before God.

(2) If you believe you must add your righteousness to Christ's righteousness for your justification before God, or if you believe you must pay for sin by your suffering or obedience, you will always be plagued with doubt and uncertainty, for you will always wonder when you have done enough (and that is precisely the point—you can never do enough). But when you turn from yourself, from your sin, and even from your supposed works of righteousness, and by faith embrace Christ and His righteousness alone, God in effect declares, "It is enough, you are pardoned of all your sin and accepted as righteous, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to you by faith alone."

(3) Now that does not make your works of obedience optional, for all who have been justified by faith alone will desire to show forth their love for such a merciful God by keeping His good commandments (and when those who are justified fall into sin, their conscience is pricked by the conviction of God's Spirit and they repent and seek the Father's forgiveness). And even this process impresses an assurance upon the conscience of the believer that he/she has eternal life.

B. Observe now in 1 John 5:13 that the stated purpose for this Apostolic letter is "that ye may know that ye have eternal life."

1. It is not simply a desirable thing for the Christian to know that he has eternal life. It is God's revealed will that all who trust in the Son of God as their only righteousness before God know with assurance that they have eternal life. For without that assurance and that peace of conscience, how will the Christian learn to enjoy Christ? If the believer

still doubts that God's condemning wrath has been satisfied once and for all by Christ on his/her behalf, how will the believer be able to fully enjoy the Lord or His many benefits (1 John 1:4: "And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full")?

2. Also note that this assurance of salvation (in 1 John 5:13) is not only for apostles (who had received immediate revelation from God), but is also the cherished privilege of all who believe in the Son of God (1 John 3:18-19; Hebrews 6:11).

C. Let me further clarify this assurance of faith and salvation spoken here by the following statements.

1. This subjective, inward assurance of faith is not necessarily present in all genuine Christians at all times. Even David, a man after God's own heart, struggled at times with certain doubts (Psalm 77:7-10; Song 5:6).

2. In this regard listen again to the words of our *Confession of Faith* (18:4):

True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it; by falling into some special sin, which woundeth the conscience, and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation; by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light: yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may in due time be revived, and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair.

3. Assurance of faith and salvation in the life of the Christian is the fruit of the following: (1) trusting in the promises of God's Word (God's faithfulness to keep His promise, 2 Timothy 1:12: Romans 4:21); (2) inspecting the fruit in the Christian's life (if God's grace is present it will evidence itself by loving holiness, loving the truth, and loving God and communing with Him, and loving our neighbor, 1 John 2:3-5—1 John 1:9; 2 John 1:9; 1 John 3:18-19; 1 John 4:7); and (3) the inward testimony

of God's Spirit (bearing witness in our conscience that we are the children of God, Romans 8:16). However, if we fall into sin and do not grieve over it, if we grow cold and indifferent to the things of God and fall away from our first love, if we become preoccupied with our own comfort and pleasure, like David, we may indeed expect to experience doubt and anguish of conscience as the Lord withdraws the light of His countenance from us (Psalm 51:12: "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation").

4. Dear ones, our conscience can also become so focused upon ourselves, upon our sins, and upon our failures that it despairs of hope because it loses sight of the love of Christ and forgiveness of Christ in the gospel, (which alone can heal the broken, tormented conscience) and loses sight of the promises of God's continual communion with us (which is a daily refreshment and encouragement to our conscience that He delights to spend time with us in a relationship of sweet fellowship even though we have often failed Him). And when we offend God and man, let us humbly come before God with a broken and contrite spirit and seek God's fatherly forgiveness and the forgiveness of others against whom we have sinned (rather than continuing in unrepentant sin and with a conscience that lies under the conviction of the Holy Spirit).

Dear ones, the answer to an accusing and condemning conscience is the gospel of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:33-34; 2 Timothy 1:12 [He is able to keep and guard myself and my complete salvation]). Only those who believe and trust in Christ can know within their conscience that they have eternal life. The invitation to believe the gospel is freely offered to you today by the Lord God. Do not refuse Him or the testimony He gives concerning His Son, for to do so is to call the living God who created all things a liar (1 John 5:10-12). Today is the day of salvation. Delay not nor put off what should be done right now. Embrace the Lord Jesus Christ and His righteousness alone as your only hope of eternal salvation. Come to the feast which has been prepared and dine with Him, enjoy Him for

He alone is everlasting life. He alone is peace, and that peace and assurance within your conscience can be yours. Everything else in this world may be taken from you, but if you have Christ you have everlasting life, you have peace with God, you have the peace of God which passeth all understanding, you have everything. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved right now and for all eternity.

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