

Resourced to Fight Well

1 Timothy 1:19-20

"A bad conscience is the mother of all heresies."

John Calvin

Introduction: On April 5, 2007, 1,195 passengers enjoyed the accommodations of the cruise ship *Sea Diamond*, taking in the aesthetic pleasures of the Grecian coast and its many islands. At around 4pm, the ship suddenly and unexpectedly ran aground on a *well-marked* volcanic reef east of Nea Kameni, which is located within the Greek island of Santorini. Passengers had to be evacuated by car ramps and rope ladders onto rescue boats before the ship was towed off the rocks and stabilized, only to later sink due to the excessive water taken on board. Four passengers were injured and two passengers bodies were never found, presumed to be dead as a result of the tragic and very easily avoided wreck.

How did this happen? With all of our modern day navigation technology and mapping, these types of shipwrecks should never happen, even with the potential treacherous conditions of the Aegean Sea. In the investigation to follow it was determined that the captain of the ship exercised *poor navigation, recklessness, and neglect*. Though he disputed that maps were out of date and did not account for the reef, it was made clear that all the necessary resources for a safe trip were there, but he ***simply neglected the warning and navigation system that guides ships through these waters.***

God has gifted humanity with a warning and navigation system in our inner man called our *conscience*. Each person, whether they believe in God or not, the Bible or not, or claim there are no absolutes or not, have the law of God written on their hearts and a conscience that either *accuses or excuses them* (Romans 2:14-15). This means that every human being knows it's wrong to kill another, lie, steal, or commit adultery, because their conscience informs them of the fact. However, **two realities are evident from this:** the conscience can be ignored (we will do all these things anyway), and when we violate our conscience, negative things are produced (like accusation). J. I Packer said it this way:

*"An **educated, sensitive conscience is God's monitor**. It alerts us to the moral quality of what we do or plan to do, forbids lawlessness and irresponsibility, and makes us feel **guilt, shame, and fear of the future** retribution that it tells us we deserve, when we have allowed ourselves to defy its restraints.*

*Satan's strategy is to **corrupt, desensitize, and if possible kill our consciences**. The relativism, materialism, narcissism, secularism, and hedonism of today's western world help him mightily toward his goal. His task is made yet simpler by the way in which the world's moral weaknesses have been taken into the contemporary church."*¹

When we feel the negatives, we are left with choices. *How do I continue making decisions in life and get rid of the guilt, shame, and fear that are produced?* The answer that our world will put forth is to suppress those feelings, to silence them. We can come up with reasons **outside ourselves** to explain why we feel the way we do, shifting blame to others or playing the role of victim. The problem with this solution is that in the end it leaves us miserable, hopeless, and only justified in our own minds. The true answer lies at the heart of the gospel itself. The gospel recognizes our sin and deals with the core issue, and our conscience **signals there is something wrong inside of us**. This should lead us to repentance and justification by God through Christ, which then leads us to joy and hope.

¹ J.I Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness*, p. 151.

As we follow the progression of thought by Paul in this letter, we are reminded of the task he was entrusting to Timothy, the task of upholding the Biblical realities of the gospel that had been corrupted by false teachers in the church. He was to do this in and for **love** (1 Tim. 1:5) and to accomplish his mission as a good soldier, waging a good warfare (1 Tim. 1:18), knowing he was battling an unseen but deadly enemy. In order to battle well, Timothy had to use the **right resources** or weapons, the same ones that Paul used in his ministry: *a commitment to truth from a good conscience*. These two realities are uniquely and inseparably connected, and failure to neglect either one would end in **shipwreck, as it had with two in the church already**.

Positive Results of Using our Resources (19a)

“...holding faith and a good conscience.”

Prioritizing Truth in our Mind

The first priority for Timothy was to **hold or keep the faith**. This would include all the apostolic teaching, meaning he would cling to the Christian faith, the entirety of the gospel and the Word of God. Faith in God grows on the basis of the teaching we have received about Him, and as our understanding matures, so does our faith. Faith has an object and objective, and both of those are dependent on staying grounded in the timeless truth of God’s Word, believing and putting it into practice.

We stress it often but it is good to remind ourselves once again, that if we are going to grow in our love of God, of others, of the lost, or in holiness, it must be ground in our love and intake of God’s Word (1 Pet. 2:2-3). The Bible is Truth and tells us the truth, the reality of who we are and of the world around. In an ever shifting culture where truth is relative and people can make us the rules each day, we need to come back to the foundational Word. This week I talked to one of my dear friends who is taking the *Essentials* class on Thursday night, and upon the finishing of the study on the first 5 books of the OT, she said, **“I walked away with a clear sense and understanding of the fear of the LORD!”** It brought delight to this Pastor’s heart. Only coming to grips with God and His Word give us that kind of worshipful clarity that produces worship. For Timothy, staying clear and on target with God’s Word, no matter what the world around said, meant that he would have the resources to fight the right fight. But the **truth and our faith do not act alone, but work with our conscience**.

Maintaining a Good Conscience in our Heart

What is our conscience? It is our navigation system, the warning system in our heart that informs our mind. It is self-awareness that judges whether or not an act one has carried out or plans to carry out is in harmony with one’s moral standards.² **It is to our heart what pain is to our body**. Pain tells us something is wrong and directs us away, and when we fail to heed, there can be permanent damage. It’s God’s gift to all, but a **redeemed believer in Jesus Christ** now can be responsive to the leading of his conscience for his own good as he seeks to follow God with a united heart (Ps. 86:11) that knows our faith is both precious to God and will actually matter into eternity. Here is what Paul had to say about his and our consciences:

- **Paul appealed to his conscience when questioned** (Acts 23:1; Acts 24:16) – When Paul was questioned by the High Priest of the Jews or the ruler Felix, he’d appeal to the fact that he had taken pains to have a **clear conscience toward both man and God**. This did not mean he would not have negative consequences or that rulings went his way, but as far as was in his control, everything he said and did was true, regardless the outcome. For Paul, a clear conscience was

² Walter Elwell, ed, “Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible.”

better than winning an argument, getting the right judgment, or running from pain. This is similar to Martin Luther as he gave testimony before the *Diet of Worms* for his writings:

*"Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - **my conscience is captive to the Word of God**. I cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen."*

Martin Luther

- **Conscience should not be violated or wounded by others** (1 Cor. 8:7-13) – Our consciences can accuse and excuse, and they can be both *weak and strong*. A weak conscience is one that is needlessly condemned for doing something God did not speak against, but are accused anyway. The strong in conscience could differentiate clear commands and preference and walk in more freedom. The issue in the church at Corinth was a city full of **idols**, and many in the church came out of idol worship with all of its trappings. In the marketplace one could find discounted meats that had come from the Temples, where sacrifices to the gods were made and the meat was sold for a profit. Paul made the point that since idols had no real existence (1 Cor. 8:4), one could eat and not be condemned (which was good for the Dutch-Corinthians who could buy cheap meat). However, there were those that would eat the meat and their consciences would be **defiled** (1 Cor. 8:7), since it was still weak. The scenario was given of someone with a mature conscience eating meat in an idol's Temple and one who has a weak conscience seeing it, and being emboldened to follow suit, would **wound his conscience**. In this case the one with a strong conscience actually **sinned** against the one with the weaker conscience and against Christ! Our freedoms are never license to sin or to press those freedoms over others.

NOTE: 1) *We should not knowingly violate our conscience.* If an activity is wrong for you, its wrong **2)** *We should strive to grow in the freedom of our conscience, condemned only by what stands written rather than what we perceive it to be.*

- **The Holy Spirit works alongside our conscience** (Rom. 9:1) – *"I am speaking the truth in Christ -- I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit."*
- **Our Conscience can be purified** (1 Pet. 3:21) **and should be guarded and responded to** – (2 Cor. 1:12; 1 Pet. 3:16; Rom. 13:5) – Peter said that when our conscience is good, when we are slandered those who revile our good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. It motivates us to submit to authority over us and gives us a testimony of the grace of God.
- **Our conscience is NOT infallible nor is it the final authority** - *But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. 4 **For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.** 5 Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.* (1 Corinthians 4:3-5) –

Our consciences are NOT on the same level of Scripture, but it is the portal to let the truth in. It is like a **skylight that lets the light in. When its blurry, it needs to be cleaned, but when it clean it lets us see clearly.** Pau lived in a way that would not violate his conscience, but he had to admit that he *could have* without knowing. Since God ultimately judges at the level of our heart, we will all be examined one day. He went on in verse 6 to say we do not judge above what stands written, meaning we cannot ultimately judge each others intentions or motives but only

that which is clearly stated by Scripture. Scripture, then, is the ultimate foundation to shape and inform our conscience.

Negative Consequences of Neglecting Resources (19b)

"By rejecting this, some have made a shipwreck of their faith, among whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander..."

Neglected Consciences Ruin

This issue was not hypothetical, since there were two specific men in the church who had violated their faith and their consciences, and it led to **shipwreck**. We do not know much about Hymenaeus and Alexander, but we have a little insight according to Paul's second letter. In **2 Timothy 2:16-18**, we see that Hymenaeus, along with a man named Philetus, had taught that the resurrection had already happened. This false teaching had repercussions: it spread like **gangrene**, and was upsetting the faith of some. Failing to heed to warning system not only meant that the individual faith is shipwrecked along with a relationship with God, but it will spread to the rest of the church and take others down with it. Left unattended, detached from God's Word, ignored, and failing to respond to one's conscience will lead to it becoming:

- **Seared** (2 Tim. 4:2) - Some leaders had tumbled down a pathway that had begun to teach demonic teachings out of both insincerity and lies. Searing of the conscience takes place over time, where one becomes desensitized and unable to feel. I've watched this not from leaders in the church as much as from some men I've worked with, who have been so given over to pornography that they no longer felt bad or guilty because they no longer felt *anything*! Violating one's conscience over and over will lead it to become non-responsive, like a heart that is sealed over with fat and cannot feel any kind of conviction by the conscience or Spirit.
- **Defiled** (Titus 1:15) - *"To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both **their minds and their consciences are defiled**."* Minds that are defiled by sin will invariably have consciences that follow suit. Notice that belief and defiled consciences go together, which also means that once belief is given, consciences can become pure.
- **Insanity** (Rom. 1:28, 32) - *"And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done...though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but give approval to those who practice them."* A seared conscience that is defiled through unbelief will ultimately lead to a **debased or insane mind**, justifying sin as righteousness, inventing evil, and turning on anyone who stood in their way. Friday night we heard the testimony of **Melissa Ohden** who shared that 42 years ago her maternal grandmother arranged for her maternal mother to have a saline abortion, and though she was born even after that, was left to die on the delivery table. Our conscience can become so seared and minds so focused on ourselves that we can do the insane and call it "good" in our mind. However this always leaves us wanting, since it does not bring the outcome we hoped for but leaves us desperate.

"When we violate our conscience, it condemns us, triggering feelings of shame, anguish, regret, consternation, anxiety, disgrace, and even fear. When we follow our conscience, it commends us, bringing joy, serenity, self-respect, well-being, and gladness."³

³ John MacArthur, *The Vanishing Conscience*, p. 37.

Restoring a Healthy Conscience

- **Confess any known or hidden sin** (Prov. 28:13) *"Whoever conceal his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy."* Confession and admission are a first step, since so many of our violations of conscience happen in our mind and heart, the areas of life that no one else can see and that we can so easily ignore or refuse to acknowledge.
- **Repent and forsake that sin** (2 Tim. 2:25) - God grants repentance, so if we repent, throwing ourselves on Christ and off of ourselves, it is because God is granting it. Because He cleanses from within, it means we can forsake whatever sin we've been involved in and run to Him.
- **Seek forgiveness from and be reconciled to anyone you've wronged** (Matt. 5:23-24) - *"So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift."* So much joy is lost by holding on to grudges, refusing to grant forgiveness, and focusing on wounds.
- **Educate your conscience by feasting on God's Word** (Ps. 19:105; 1 Pet. 2:2-3) - *How do we inform our conscience?* Through the whole of God's Word. Not just one verse, since focusing on one verse ALONE, out of context, can lead us to NEEDLESSLY violate our conscience, but rather understanding God's heart, the work of Christ, and our freedom in Him.
- **Re-orientate your life to respond to your conscience** - Every time our conscience begins to warn, we must follow and heed. We do this through discipline, but also through the leading of the Spirit and the freedom Christ brings, knowing we are forgiven and free from the Law as a means of our righteousness.

Corrective Measures when Failure to Heed Resources (20)

"...whom I have handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme."

God's Sovereign Purpose in Handing Over to Satan

- **As seen in the life of Job** (Job 1-2; 1:11; 2:6, 2:10) - God shows His purpose through Satanic attack that faith and godliness are not dependant on positive circumstances
- **As seen in the life of Jesus** (Matthew 4:1-11) - God used Satanic attack to prove Jesus' character, that He would stand true as the perfect and obedient God-Man
- **As seen in the life of Paul** (2 Cor. 12:1-10) - God used Satanic attack to keep Paul humble and dependant on His grace, to operate by the strength God provided, not his own
- **As seen in the life of Peter** (Luke 22:31-33) - God used Satanic attack to show that even if there was failure on the part of man, God would not fail in securing faith for His own.

God's Protective and Corrective Act in Discipline

Now no one likes to confront sin, and they really should not. Paul's actions here seem harsh to us, as these two men were **handed over to Satan**. That seems vindictive, but love is truly behind this. In 1 Cor. 5 we read of another situation where someone in the church was sent out, excommunicated from fellowship, not to be vindictive, but to be restorative (1 Cor. 5:5). This would ensure purity in the church (5:6) and the right kind of judgment IN THE CHURCH (5:11-13). By putting people OUT of the church into the sphere of Satan, it gives an opportunity for **repentance, learning, and restoration**. In fact, it can be argued that the person put out in 1 Cor. 5 was the same who came back to the church in 2 Cor. 2,

forgiven, comforted, and reaffirmed in love (2 Cor. 2:7-8). This process is ONLY going to happen if we are compelled to confront as a means of protective and corrective love for God's people.