

### Our Consciences Need To Be Fixed

"Conscience doth make cowards of us all," says Hamlet (3,1). Our consciences don't make us just cowards; they can damn us. Therefore, broken consciences need to be fixed not lived with.

Your conscience can be broken 3 ways. First, it can be hardened. It doesn't feel guilty when it should. Proverbs speaks of the adulterous woman who thinks she can wipe her conscience clean as easily as her mouth (30:20). Jeremiah prophesies that in the last days people will cease to blush (6:15). "My conscience doesn't bother me," settles the matter for most. Society's new morality, psychological explanation of decadent behavior, and relative truth has made conscience all but disappear. Luther said it's the nature of all hypocrites and false prophets to cause consciences to disappear. The vanishing conscience plagues our society. 1,500 years ago Augustine taught that conscience is what places man over animals, so dealing with guilt by eliminating the conscience only succeeds at the cost of making us animals.

Your conscience needs to be fixed if you explain your sins away by chemical imbalances, genes, addictions, upbringing, or poverty. Your conscience needs fixing if you give into sin and have no twinges or pangs. If your conscience doesn't bother you when you dishonor your parents, mistreat your spouse, defraud your government, or bear false witness, you have a hardened conscience and it's damning you.

You probably already knew that a hardened conscience is a broken one, but did you know so is a timid one? A timid conscience feels guilty when it should not. Shakespeare described the timid conscience well, "My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,/ And every tongue bring in several tale./ And every tale condemns me for a villain" (Richard III, 5,3). Upton Sinclair described it as memory's tomb breaking open and letting out the ghosts of his old life to whip him (*Jungle*, Chpt. 22). Steinbeck spoke of the timid conscience gathering guilt as if it were gold (*East of Eden*, 308). This fits well with a proverb of Luther's day, "Old guilt [like gold] gathers no rust" (LW, 7, 227). Luther himself thought of the timid conscience as a mean little dog named Remorse which "bites you all your life without ceasing, even though your sin is forgiven" (LW, 6, 369). Even "if it is quiet in life, it nevertheless present at the time of death and barks" (Ibid., 84).

Can you feel it nipping? Luther would say all of us can. He said that everyone if pressed out of their mask has a human face weeping or covering its eyes over something that happened once (LW, 8, 368). So what is it with you? What can't your timid conscience believe you're forgiven for? What one thing keeps popping up in your heart? What sin have you confessed over and over again? What sin of yours was not on Jesus' back? Which one do you see staining you even in the flood of Jesus' blood? Your conscience is broken if you're being stabbed by sins you've been absolved for. And it's not being a pious Christian to despair over sins you've been absolved for; it's being an unbeliever. A conscience that refuses to believe that God has or can put away its sins damns.

A timid conscience feels guilty for sins that are already forgiven. That's bad, an evil conscience is worse. It feels guilty for what isn't sin, and then you're in a real predicament. Luther said, "If you permit men to make such things to be sins, there is no longer any Christ who will take them away;" (Luther in Walther, *True Form*, 11011). So what can you do if you're hounded by guilt because you don't like the same things your parents do, you made an unwise decision that cost you money, you don't have the same political views as your spouse? All you can do is despair. Jesus died for actual sins, not made up ones.

Luther was an expert on the evil conscience. He said that it puts a bad construction on the best things. An evil conscience feels guilty for weather, for illness, for the *possibility* that it has offended someone. From one real sin it invents countless others. From real sins against parents, an evil conscience spawns guilt over their marital problems. From real sins as parents, it sprouts guilt for our children's sins as adults. Luther said an evil conscience is like a frightened goose which always flees the wrong way. When a hawk chases her, she tries to fly though she'd do better to run, and when a wolf attacks, she tries to run though she could escape by flying (LW, 12, 368). An evil conscience runs away from God when it isn't being chased and thinks it's heading toward heaven by feeling bad for what isn't sinful, and that in reality, is heading for hell.

An evil, timid, or a hardened conscience is broken and it can damn, but it can be fixed. First, realize your conscience isn't God; it's not even God's voice in you. This is the teaching of paganism not Christianity. For the Christian the voice of God is the Holy Spirit in Word and Sacrament. Christians exalt the Holy Spirit; pagans exalt the conscience. Seneca in his *Ethics* points to the conscience as the living witness and incorruptible judge of all our actions. Rousseau says that the conscience never deceives. The devil tells Eve her conscience can be God. Luther, by contrast, calls conscience "an evil beast and wicked devil" (LW, 7, 271). Luther said all that our natural conscience can do is "mistake that which is sin for that which is no sin, and that which is no sin for that which is sin." This view of conscience is what led Luther to say, "Sin boldly". This is a call to fight the 'old' conscience, to cast off its suffocating yoke. Luther said it this way, "Sometimes we've got to drink a bit more freely, play around, indulge and even sin a little to spite the devil, so that we may leave him no place for troubling our consciences with trifles" (*Letter to Jerome Weller* (Jul 1530)).

This, of course, is advise for timid and evil consciences not for hardened ones, but even with a hardened conscience, the goal is to dethrone it. Your conscience, evil, timid, or hardened isn't God. The hardened conscience thinks it's *infallible* like God. It can't be mistaken; if it doesn't feel bad about something, then it can't be a sin. The timid or evil conscience thinks its *all-knowing* like God. So, if the timid conscience doesn't feel forgiven, it's not. But John says

literally, "Whenever our hearts know things against us, God is greater than our hearts and *He* knows all things." John says boldly, "God is greater than your heart." Just because your heart condemns you doesn't mean God does, and just because your heart doesn't condemn you doesn't mean God doesn't. God's voice, His Word, is to be paid attention to not your conscience's voice. If God's Word condemns your thoughts, words, deeds, or lifestyle, then you are condemned regardless of what your conscience tells you.

Our fallen conscience is hopelessly snarled like a backlash on a fishing reel. It's a tangled mess of real sins, false guilt, and convoluted reasoning. The key to fixing a broken conscience is not to get caught up in the tangle. We pray in the Collect that our hearts might be fixed where true joys are to be found. True joys aren't to be found in the knotted verdicts, conflicting reasonings, and distorted pangs of conscience. True joys are to be found in the God who knows everything. God knows all your sins, the ones no one knows, even the ones you don't know yourself. He also knows that He personally loaded all of your sins on Jesus' back. He knows Jesus went to the cross and fully paid for your sins. And He knows that He raised Jesus from the dead on Easter because the debt was paid. So God knows, whether you do or not, that your guilts are gone.

But your heart still comes down on you, doesn't it? It has a lifetime of sinning to assault you with. Years after being absolved of some sin, your conscience stabs you for it as if it were never forgiven. And then there is your daily sins to stab you with. Doubts arise in your heart because you're still such a sinner. Based on what *you* know, you should be condemned, but God knows everything. Fix your heart on Him not on you, on what He knows not on what you do. God can divide between your believing self and your unbelieving nature. God can distinguish between your monstrous sinful flesh scratching and kicking against all things holy and that little believing new man He created in you. All you know on some days is your sinful flesh; on those days your timid conscience is miserable or your evil one despairs. Focus on what God knows on those days. Even on your worst days, He knows that little part of you which clings to what Jesus did for you and struggles against sin and despair.

Is that enough? No, you need something to clean your conscience. Actually, what you need is a new conscience. And that's what God gives. God doesn't clean up consciences anymore than He cleans up the sinful flesh. God doesn't reform the sinful flesh; He kills it and He creates a totally new creation says St. Paul. God doesn't leave an old conscience in a new creation; he gives a new one. Where does He give new consciences? In Baptism. By the water sprinkled on your head in the name of the Triune God, God gave you a new clear conscience. You were given in Baptism what no therapy, no drug, no program, no technology, no education could ever give you: "The answer of a good conscience toward God," says 1 Peter (3:21). Water fixes a broken conscience? In Baptism, you don't debate with God about what is or isn't sin. God just plunges all of you, the entire sinful mess under waters red with the blood of Christ. He drowns the old sinful flesh, the old conscience, and gives you a new clear conscience. Use it.

When your conscience troubles you, dive into your Baptism and hear what God says. "In Baptism I drown your old sinful flesh and therefore your old conscience. In Baptism, I raise you to a new life, one just like Jesus, free of all sin and guilt. Daily, in your baptismal waters, see all your sins floating, and see at the bottom of the font, your old conscience drowned to death. See a new man emerging and rising as holy and guilt free as Jesus coming out of the tomb. Bring broken consciences back to Baptism to be fixed by water. Hardened, timid, evil ones are drowned. Hardened ones can't excuse real sins; timid ones can't accuse with absolved sins; and evil ones can't accuse with what isn't sin. The old conscience can neither excuse nor accuse; it's dead; it can be ignored. God is much greater than it and standing in the Waters of your Baptism so are you. Amen

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