**Grace Group Guide**

**9-20-17**

**First John 3:19-24**

By way of introduction this week, I’d like us to start our time by looking at some Scriptural references that deal with the conscience. 1 Sam 24:5; Acts 23:1; Acts 24:16; Romans 2:15; 1 Cor 8:12; 1 Tim 1:5; Heb 9:14. **How do these verses help us to better understand the text we saw this past Sunday pertaining to our conscience and the encouragement that stems from understanding it?**

**David Legge** said – *“Now if you are conscious in your life of a momentary failure, of a partial transgression - at some time in your Christian experience you have let the Lord down, and you're continually reminded of it, and through it you have a condemnation attitude toward yourself, a bad conscience - does that mean that you no longer love the Lord? Does that mean that you have forfeited His grace, you no longer have a claim upon His name, that He's letting you go and maybe you're not even saved at all? Now listen, here's the answer, this is what John is trying to say: first of all, what you need to do is what we studied in chapter 1 and verse 9, 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'.*

*Because God is greater than even our condemned heart, He not only understands the way we really are in all of our sin that we can't even see with our eyes, but He is able to undertake for our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness… It's not that God minimizes or disregards our failures, He knows them better than we know them. Yet the amazing thing is that this God acquits us, even though He does know them. Here's the big question that John is trying to get to: why then should we listen to our condemning heart?*

*If God is greater than our heart, and God knows all about us and what we've done, yet God still undertakes to forgive us our sins, why should we listen to our condemning heart? He, our God, is the just One and the Justifier of those who believe in Jesus. Am I speaking, tonight, to a Christian, and you got a condemning heart, and you're harder on yourself than God is? You hammer yourself constantly, because you've an oversensitive conscience; and you allow the devil to latch onto, perhaps, sins that were legitimate sins, but that Christ has forgiven you for a long, long time ago - but you still have this condemning heart that you won't let go of, and you're harder on yourself than the Almighty is! Oh, you need to hear this tonight: God is greater than your heart. He knows all things!”*

**How can we know whether feelings of guilt stem from Satan’s accusations or from the Holy Spirit’s conviction?**

First of all,when the Holy Spirit convicts us, He is specific about our sin, so that we can confess it and experience no break in fellowship with Him. When Satan accuses us, it’s often in generalities- such as - you’ll never measure up, you’ve disappointed God too many times, you are never going to overcome this habit, you’re hopeless. When Satan accuses us, he wants us to feel too shamed and condemned to bring the problem to Jesus.

I think of the Apostle Peter and the statement that he made to Jesus when he was asked for the third time in John chapter 21 “do you love Me?” Three times right in a row he’d been asked the same question there, and he says emphatically that third time “Lord, you know all things; You know that I love You.” Peter is one of those guys that I’m sure could have been beaten down from time to time by his conscience. After all, here’s a guy who claimed to be Jesus’ right-hand-man, yet when he was confronted in a time of great distress (three times) he denies having any association with Jesus. He’d even been warned beforehand that would happen, and he passionately denied it.

But here, having learned from that mistake and no doubt seeking forgiveness for it, he acknowledges that Jesus knows everything, including the true desire of his heart and in that, He knows where Peters affections lie. Would the enemy use Peter’s shortcomings to try and burden him later on the ministry? I’m sure of it. But when those attacks came, Peter could appeal to the highest court of all and acknowledge that God knew where his heart truly was.

John MacArthur mentions some other ways in which the enemy uses the conscience to work against us. He starts by saying: *“Conscience is not the Law of God, conscience is not a system of morality. Conscience is a device that reacts based upon whatever your highest level of morality is. If you have a low level of morality, you have a very minimally functioning conscience.  Satan in order to literally send men to hell on a greased slide wants to neutralize the conscience. And there are a number of ways you can neutralize the conscience. One, you misinform it. In other words, you give people a standard of morality that is a lie but if they believe that, then their conscience will react to that standard. If you're going to take the world’s perverted, inverted, twisted contemporary philosophy of morality and buy into that as your highest level of morality, then your conscience is only going to be able to react at that level. That's why it's critical that people have a true understanding of the Law of God.*

*The second thing it does is try to silence the conscience by telling you that you shouldn't feel guilty, you should feel good about yourself. So, you invent a culture of self-esteem, with everybody running around telling themselves how great they are. And they literally silence their conscience.*

*The third way that you neutralize conscience is by searing it. The New Testament talks about having a seared conscience. That's a desensitized conscience. That's like something that's been burned so many times, all the nerves are dead and it feels nothing. And the way you do that is by continually violating your conscience, continually violating it, violating it, and violating it until you've covered it over with so much resistance and so much scar tissue that when it does cry out against you, you’re so good at not listening that it has little effect. That's what the enemy wants to do and he develops a moral system that misinforms the conscience, he develops a psychological system that tells you not to listen to conscience but override it with your love for yourself, and how proud you should be of yourself and the pursuit of your self-esteem. And he wants you to so frequently ignore your conscience that literally it becomes covered with scar tissue and ineffective. Your conscience is a critical device.*

**Where is the proper balance between accepting our human limitations, but not tolerating sin or spiritual immaturity?**

The first anchor for assurance is always faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. If your trust is in Christ, God has promised you eternal life and He has promised never to allow you to be snatched out of His hand (John 3:16; 10:28-30). A man once told D. L. Moody that he was worried because he didn’t feel saved. Moody asked, “Was Noah safe in the ark?” “Certainly he was,” the man replied. “Well, what made him safe, his feeling or the ark?” The point is, if you’re in Christ, it’s not your feelings that save you from God’s judgment. It’s Christ who saves! Faith puts you in the ark! Make sure you’re on board! -**Steven Cole**