

Conscience Plus Faith

By Dave Urbanski

“Let your conscience be your guide” is a saying that goes back a long way — and shows up in the “Pinocchio” clip from Pastor Scott’s message to us this past Sunday. But they are empty words.

Everybody has a conscience. But that doesn’t mean it’s trained to lead us in the right direction — and that goes for believers in Jesus, too.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 4:4, “For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.”

So even when Paul, the apostle of Christ, had a clear conscience, he didn’t necessarily believe that meant the state of his walk was OK! He had to go deeper than that. We have to go deeper than that.

Pastor Scott on Sunday reminded us that our previous two studies dealt with having a clear conscience before God and having a clear conscience before men. And this time Pastor Scott talked to us about properly employing our clear conscience.

He brought us to 1 Peter 3:15-16: “... but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, **having a good conscience**, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.”

That’s one way to train our conscience: That instead of being harsh and rough with our witness for Christ, we should be gentle and respectful — and that way, even amid those who are spiritually opposed to us, they won’t be able to get away with slandering us, because the truth about who we are will be evident to them and to those around them.

In the same way, recall that Pastor Scott talked about the words found in Hebrews 13:18: “Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things.” We should be in prayer for ourselves and for others so that while our conscience is clear, we will behave in the right way and build our ministries. Pastor Scott also reminded us that there’s a continuous cycle at work: When we do the right thing, we strengthen and exercise the muscles of our conscience — which helps us do the right thing the next time we’re presented with a choice between right and wrong. And that cycle keeps going! So it’s important to jump on that cycle. Because

we certainly don't want to be in a cycle where we're habitually doing the WRONG thing!

Paul made this plain in Romans 13, urging believers to subject themselves to "the governing authorities." And not just because doing so keeps us away from their wrath and punishment — as well as the wrath and punishment of the Lord — but "also for the sake of conscience." (v. 5)

Pastor Scott also emphasized the dual tools of having both a clear conscience and a sincere faith, which is reflected quite a bit in Scripture. Paul wrote in his first letter to Timothy (chapter 1, verse 5), "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

Hard things happen in our lives, and our resulting emotions can deceive us and pull us off track. That's why, Pastor Scott said, we require the strength internally that comes from our clear conscience and sincere faith working together.

"This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience." — 1 Timothy 1:18

Indeed, the world is not a playground but a battlefield, Pastor Scott told us. In fact, he said our realization and internalization of this truth demonstrates spiritual maturity. Because Satan would love nothing more than to get us distracted and addicted and fall into sin — he lays traps all around, all the time.

Paul wrote in the two verses that follow in 1 Timothy that "some have made shipwreck of their faith" by not exercising their faith and conscience. That's not a situation we want to ever approach! Indeed, Pastor Scott emphasized that this dual guidance system — an early-warning system, if you will — will flash the red lights in front of us when we're headed for trouble. And it will shore up our bearings and reinforce our points of reference in relation to the Lord.

But only if we've trained our guidance system to align with biblical teaching!

Pastor Scott added a chart showing us four ways our conscience informs our self concept, and four ways our faith informs it. Remember it? He said our conscience tells us to do what's right, deal with wrongs, be honest, and care about others — and our faith shows us that God is big, we are small, we are part of God's plan, and we are stewards of what God has given us.

But have you noticed that in our world today, many people tend to think the opposite? For starters, many believe THEY are big — in fact, that they're the most important people on earth. As for God? At best, for many, the Lord is a blip on their radar screens. Not very important at all.

Pastor Scott warned, however, that typically when the storms of life come, such people suddenly realize they need something bigger in their lives than themselves.

Therefore, let us determine this day to orient ourselves properly and seek the Lord's guidance regarding how we fit into his plan — and then that BOOSTS our self concept, gives us confidence, and our conscience and faith are strengthened.

At this point in Pastor Scott's message, he shifted to the topic of bullying — a sad fact in our world that not only affects kids but many adults as well. So Pastor Scott offered three tools we can use to combat it, along with what he called a "secret weapon."

First, we can ignore bullying. Sometimes the bullies stop when they don't get the reaction they want. ("Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense." — Proverbs 19:11)

Second, we can confront the bullying if ignoring it doesn't work. ("If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother." — Matthew 18:15)

Third, we can get some help if the first two tools don't work. ("But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses." — Matthew 18:16)

But sometimes, Pastor Scott said, none of those tools do the trick — and that's where the "secret weapon" comes in.

Check out the passage Pastor Scott used — from the NIV Bible translation — from 1 Peter 2:18-20: "Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God."

Pastor Scott said the Greek words "conscious of God" in the passage literally mean "my conscience is facing toward God." In other words, our radar system must be oriented toward the Lord as we continue to do what's right even when wrong is being done to us! And when that happens, the Lord is pleased with us — which often leads to blessings.

Pastor Scott urged us to take to heart that such a perspective is part of our calling as believers! Most of us, if not all of us, know we're going to be unjustly treated in this world — which is why we need to have a plan in such circumstances.

As the Apostle Peter writes in his first epistle, Christ is our example: "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow

in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. **Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.**" (2:23)

Certainly, we're not called to just put up with others' bullying behavior — but sometimes circumstances prevent us from escaping or resolving the situation. For example, we need to stay in a difficult job or marriage. Instead of becoming angry and bitter and imagining revenge, none of which pleases God, let us employ our "secret weapon" as we trust the Lord as the one who will take care of us in his own time.

Pastor Scott also provided us with a helpful summary of what he believes the conscience is — a "God-given internal motivation system to designed to be led by the Holy Spirit, and founded on the word of God that prompts a person to do what's right, deal with wrongs, be honest, and care about others."

Because when we understand how our conscience ought to operate, we can understand what Paul desires as he writes in Ephesians 3:16: "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being."

And what is our "inner being"? Pastor Scott said it's what resides inside us — our heart, our conscience, our faith.

Don't forget, above all, when we have a sincere faith and a clear conscience, we have at our disposal a valuable tool. One that will move us toward strength and confidence. One that will give us power when we're being bullied and drawn into the arms of the Lord. One that will guide us to living more effective Christian lives.