

* * * * *
JUST FOLLOW YOUR CONSCIENCE – NOT! Michael B. Beough
Psalm 32:1-5; I Corinthians 10:23-30 September 27, 2009
* * * * *

The Bible never tells us to let our conscience be our guide. I want to talk about that this morning because such advice can be a crazy-maker. It can stunt our emotional and spiritual growth. It can also be downright dangerous, especially if a person has no conscience. Or if a person’s conscience allows him or her to do something that is obviously immoral and against God’s will.

As a preview to where I am headed, hear this: **the Bible sets liberty in Christ above conscience as the guiding light for our lives.** Here is why.

The Bible knows that our conscience is socially conditioned. And the Bible knows that our consciences are vulnerable to those who want to control us. Let’s consider these two biblical insights.

First, the Bible knows that our conscience is socially conditioned.

In I Corinthians 10, the Apostle Paul takes issue with some in the church in Corinth for this very thing. It seems that some Christians refuse to eat meat from the local meat markets in Corinth. The reason they refuse is because the meat comes from animals used in the sacrifices at the local pagan temples. Their conscience will not let them eat the meat. For example, if a Roman neighbor invited them over for a backyard cookout, they would politely decline because of the meat.

Now Paul thinks this is silly. In chapter 8, where the discussion of eating “pagan” meat begins, he says these food nitpickers have a weak conscience. What he means is that their conscience prevents them from seeing through to the truth. They are feeling guilty about something rather trivial in the grand scheme of things. In fact, Paul says it is a theological issue. Since pagan idols have no reality and God is the provider of all foods, we should just eat with a thankful heart whatever is served. “For why should my liberty be subject to the judgment of someone else’s conscience?”

To us this fuss over eating meat may sound trivial. Why does Paul spend so much time talking about it? Because the issue goes much deeper. It goes to the heart of our faith. Here is what is so serious about all this. The role of the conscience is to govern our actions through feelings of guilt. Psychology tells us that our conscience resides in our superego. It is the repository of our sense of right and wrong. This superego is the referee of our ego. When the ego does something that goes against the superego, we experience the feeling of guilt.

Where does this superego come from? It develops from the environment in which we grow up. At a very early age we begin learning what is right and wrong. We learn it from our parents, from our experiences. Here’s the rub. Our superego is not very trustworthy. The right and wrong we learn often develop from the

neuroses or opinions of others. The result is that a lot of us carry unnecessary guilty feelings that have nothing to do with what we deserve or what God wants. We just carry it around with us because someone somewhere in the past laid it on us, and probably for their own selfish benefit or out of ignorance.

I'll never forget the first time I bought gasoline other than Exxon. Back then it was Esso gasoline produced by Humble Oil and Refining Company in Baytown, Texas. I pulled into a Texaco station for the first time in my life because the gas was cheaper. I was an adult. Now imagine my guilt feelings. My father worked for Humble Refinery for 41 years. In our family, we always heard about the superiority of Esso gasoline. We were company people, loyal to the end. When I bought from Texaco, it was like betraying my father. Then I tried to keep it a secret. That's what guilt does to us. I even wondered if my car would suffer from this "inferior" gasoline. I couldn't enjoy the cheaper price because of the guilt. I finally got over it, and in hind sight it was a rather trivial matter, but what about those more serious guilt feelings? The guilt we feel for the way things turned out in our families? The guilt a parent feels when a child goes off the deep end? The guilt when someone dies and you wonder why it wasn't you? Things we feel guilty about that prevent us from enjoying our liberty in Christ?

You simply cannot trust your conscience. And that brings us to the second biblical insight regarding our conscience.

Our consciences are vulnerable to those who want to control us.

Listen to I Timothy 4:1-3. This is the Apostle Paul writing to a young pastor named Timothy. *"The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. 2 Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. 3 They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth."*

Paul is warning Timothy about those who try to impose their conscience on everyone else. They will decide for us what is right and what is wrong. They will try to reshape our conscience according to their ideal. They will give the look of righteousness, but in reality they will be liars because their consciences are closed to the truth, "sealed as with a hot iron."

Now Paul is not talking about world leaders. He is talking about those within the church who want to tell everyone else what is right and what is wrong for them. Paul says these people are manipulators.

What these manipulators know is that our consciences are vulnerable. Most of us can be shamed into doing almost anything. Now I am not calling all of us liars, but all of us, maybe with an exception or two, have practiced the art of controlling others through shame. We have used guilt to motivate others to do our will. It works, to a certain extent.

Where would parents be if they didn't have this skill in using guilt?

"I can't believe you spilled that milk and didn't tell me about it. That's not like you." (Dagger in the heart! Shame on me. I have disappointed my Mom. I'll never do that again. Or at least I'll never let her know when I have done something that will disappoint her.)

"There are children in China who would gladly eat that food on your plate." (Shame on me. So I start eating everything on my plate. And maybe as an adult I still can't leave anything on the plate, or on the serving dish, or in the kitchen. I eat it all not realizing that my weight gain is rooted in guilt.)

"After all I've done for you and you tell me you can't even come home for Christmas." (Shame on me. So you come home for Christmas. You walk in the door. The whole time you're home you make it miserable for everyone else.)

Guilt and shame sort of work, but like a lot of medicines, they have serious side effects.

We are good at this in the church, too. If we can make you feel guilty enough, maybe you will volunteer to do something, or maybe you will give more money, or maybe you will come to worship more often. Shame, shame, shame on you. We are good at the shame game. We know how to get those parental voices playing in your head. We go after your conscience. And then we tell you that if you feel guilty, it is God. It is God. And if you just do what we say, you will feel better about yourself.

Well, sort of. Not really. When someone starts imposing their conscience on you and then uses it against you, watch out! Especially if they do it in the name of God. Paul says what we have been given is liberty in Christ, not a guilty conscience. God sent Jesus into the world to release us from our guilt and shame, not pile it on. He came to redeem our conscience. To set it free from all those parental tapes that keep playing over and over in our minds. He came to be Lord of our consciences, to clear them up, to give us what the Bible calls a *clear conscience*.

The Bible is clear. God motivates us with love, not guilt. God doesn't want us in his house of worship because we will feel guilty if we don't show up. He wants us here because we love Him. If it takes guilt to get us motivated to help a person in need, then we are still emotionally infantile and spiritually dead. If it takes guilt to get us to do the right thing, then watch out. Somebody has your number.

So what do we do with these guilt-inducing consciences? What do we do if we are so easily shamed by others who try to manipulate us with guilt?

1. Join a group that will help you focus on God's love instead of on your feelings of guilt. Such a group is one that is more concerned with building

healthy relationships than with "sin-busting." More interested in grace than in judgment. *Lord, deliver us from those who judge us.*

2. Own your guilt feelings. Investigate where you learned the guilt messages and why they have such a strict hold on you. Name the sources and forgive them for the way they controlled you with guilt. *Lord, forgive those who have used our conscience against us.*

3. Reeducate your conscience by studying Scripture and praying with others. Let others help you discover the meaning of liberty in Christ. *Lord, lead us to those who can help us.*

4. Find a new language for motivating others without taking advantage of their weak consciences. Go easy on the guilt producing language, especially with children and youth. *Lord, help us speak the truth in love.*

5. Remember that the only judge who matters is God, and God has judged you worthy of his love. Find specific ways in which you can respond to God simply because you love Him, and not because of conscience-induced guilt. *Lord, help us to love you as you first loved us through Jesus Christ our Lord.*