

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin

July 14, 2019

## Grace Wins:

### Fine-tune Your Conscience

Romans 2:12 – 3:20

*The message began with a video clip of this car going from zero to 180 miles per hour in a quarter mile.*



Choices! Choices! Which one of these fuels should I put into this drag racer so that it can accelerate to 180 miles



per hour in a quarter mile?

Anyone who knows anything about drag racing will be shouting “No! No! No! That will ruin this finely tuned machine!” You use C16. Not 87 or 88 octane but 160 octane fuel!



What is true of a drag racer is true of another finely tuned machine that God has created within us. God has given each of us a conscience that can help us immensely in our race to eternity. But it is a finely tuned machine that often gets gummed up because we fill it with the wrong kind of fuel.

So let's open up the hood and understand how this machine works, and find the fuel that will keep our conscience working so that Grace Wins.

*<sup>12</sup> All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law.*

*<sup>13</sup> For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.*

“Those who obey the law who will be declared righteous”? Is Paul saying that we can be saved by obedience to the law? No, this is a continuation of his line of argument that we studied last week. There is no good news here. Paul is making clear that **Without Grace, No One Wins.**

Then he explains that even the Gentiles who don't have the written law of the Old Testament have God's law written on their hearts. This is where Paul opens the hood so that we can see how conscience works.

*<sup>14</sup> (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law. <sup>15</sup> They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.)*

The requirements of the law are written on people's hearts. You can see that when you lift the hood because the law is the basis upon which your conscience makes judgments. Sometimes your conscience accuses you. Sometimes your conscience approves of what you do.

So your conscience is like a judge who is constantly sticking his nose into your business. "Good job!" the judge says sometimes. "You are guilty," the judge says other times.

Martin Luther once said, "To go against conscience is neither right nor safe." Why did he say that? Because your conscience, in many ways, is what you hear as the voice of God in your head. Your conscience is what you think God is saying to you.

The trouble with conscience is that it doesn't make judgments strictly based on God's Word. It makes judgments based on the God's law as you understand it.

God's law in the Bible is very clear. But we are influenced by the world around us. Often that clear word of God becomes less clear and less clear, so that it can almost be gone all together. This is what Paul wrote about in Ephesians 4:

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are **darkened in their understanding** and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the **hardening of their hearts**. Having **lost all sensitivity**, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed (Ephesians 4:17-19).

When we are influenced by the culture around us, our thinking can become foolish. Our understanding is darkened. Our hearts become hard. We lose a sensitivity to what is right.

For example, you see on TV that children talk back to their parents. So it must be ok for you to talk back to your parents and ridicule them.

You see other people being a bully at work. They seem to be getting ahead. You convince yourself it is ok to be a bully at work.

That's the trouble with conscience. It is our "voice of God," but your conscience can err because of this subtraction from God's Word.

Your conscience can also err because of addition to God's Word. You add rule to rule. Your conscience can go to the other extreme and say that it is always wrong to disagree with someone. You give in and give in, without really expressing your opinion, because your conscience says that's God's will. You have added a rule here and rule there to God's Word.

In fact, you can even add rules to God's Law that contradict God's Law. That's what Jesus mentioned in his conversation with the Pharisees:

"But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God,' they are not to 'honor their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition" (Matthew 15:5-6).

This is the problem with conscience. If you are not adding the right fuel to your conscience, even though you feel it is the voice of God, it can lead you astray.

That's what Paul warns about in the next section:

*<sup>17</sup> Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; <sup>18</sup> if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; <sup>19</sup> if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, <sup>20</sup> an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— <sup>21</sup> you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? <sup>22</sup> You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? <sup>23</sup> You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? <sup>24</sup> As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."*

*<sup>25</sup> Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. <sup>26</sup> So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? <sup>27</sup> The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.*

*<sup>28</sup> A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. <sup>29</sup> No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.*

What did their conscience tell them? God is patting me on the back because I am here in the church hearing God's Word. God is patting me on the back because I was circumcised. Today, it would be, "I've had my kids baptized and I made sure they were confirmed."

In Paul's day it was, "I win because I'm a good Jew." Today, it would be, "I win because I'm a good Christian, following all the rules."

But outward obedience wasn't enough in Paul's day and it isn't enough in our day. Others may praise you as "a good Christian," but not God.

This is the danger of a gummed up conscience. If God's law isn't clear in our hearts, we can think God is approving of us, when in reality we continue to fall under his judgment.

But a gummed up conscience isn't just destructive for us. It is destructive for others.



I remember well the reference that our seminary professor made in connection with verses 23 and 24: *You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."*

He referenced a World War II slogan: Careless talk can cost lives. C.S. Lewis, a well-known Christian author, changed that slogan. "Careless lives can cost talk."

When we act contrary to God's law, we cause God's name to be dishonored. We lose the opportunity to talk about our faith.

For example, I've heard many times that restaurant servers dread the "after church" crowd. They are rude and demanding. They stay at the table and talk. And then leave a lousy tip.

Or a co-worker knows that you go to church every Sunday, but you have a foul mouth at work and you gossip about everyone else.

Do you think anyone who has experienced this will want to talk with anyone about how wonderful the Christian faith is? Careless lives cost talk. A conscience that isn't guided by God's word is destructive not just to you, but to the people around you.

So let's use the fuel that can clean out a gummed up conscience. Paul talks about that fuel in Romans 3:1-2:

*What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? <sup>2</sup> Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.*

Our advantage in being a Christian is not that we can live such a great life that God will love us. Our advantage is that we have "the very words of God." The only way we can clear off the sludge that accumulates around our understanding of the law is the use of God's Word.

This is one of the reasons why I need to read God's Word every day. Every day I come back into the presence of God in his Word and he, in various ways and through various passages, helps me see his Law clearly, so that my conscience can make valid, faithful judgments on my actions.

Paul then gives an example of how our own human thinking can gum up our conscience again.

<sup>3</sup> *What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? <sup>4</sup> Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written:*

*"So that you may be proved right when you speak  
and prevail when you judge."*

<sup>5</sup> *But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) <sup>6</sup> Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? <sup>7</sup> Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" <sup>8</sup> Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—"Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is just!*

If God says we are sinful, then let's sin some more. Your conscience may say that, but that is certainly not God's voice. That is a voice making judgments based on a lie.

So Paul concludes this section by spending some time fine-tuning his readers' conscience. He quotes extensively from the Old Testament, especially the Psalms:

<sup>9</sup> *What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. <sup>10</sup> As it is written:*

*"There is no one righteous, not even one;  
<sup>11</sup> there is no one who understands;  
there is no one who seeks God.*

<sup>12</sup> *All have turned away,  
they have together become worthless;  
there is no one who does good,  
not even one.*”  
<sup>13</sup> *“Their throats are open graves;  
their tongues practice deceit.”*  
*“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”*  
<sup>14</sup> *“Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”*  
<sup>15</sup> *“Their feet are swift to shed blood;*  
<sup>16</sup> *ruin and misery mark their ways,*  
<sup>17</sup> *and the way of peace they do not know.”*  
<sup>18</sup> *“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”*

<sup>19</sup> *Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.* <sup>20</sup> *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.*

Here is the conclusion of Paul’s long discussion on the fact that **Without Grace, No One Wins.**  
“Through the law we become conscious sin.”

This study is meant to be like high powered racing fuel, that can clean out our conscience and make us ready for the Winner’s Circle. I can’t wait until next week to see how this fuel of God’s Word propels to us victory. Let’s leave with a little glimpse into that Winner’s Circle.

Read with me Romans 5:1-2:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand (Romans 5:1-2).

The fuel of God’s Word convinces us that we cannot be justified by obedience to God’s law. It can also convince us that we are justified, declared not guilty in God’s sight, through faith in Jesus. Through Jesus, we stand in the Winner’s Circle. Through Jesus, we stand in God’s grace. This is where we are privileged to live.

When we are tempted to step out of grace and think that we are good enough for God on our own, let your conscience be clear. Let your conscience condemn you. And let that condemnation drive you back to the place where we win. In Christ, in his forgiving love, in grace, we win. Amen.

Prepared by Pastor Peter Panitzke  
414-422-0320 ext. 122  
[ppanitzke@stpaulmuskego.org](mailto:ppanitzke@stpaulmuskego.org)

## My Next Steps to Understand “Conscience”

- **Get Out Your Catechism** – Look up “conscience” in the index. In our current catechism, you can learn about conscience in Questions 18-22, beginning on page 42.
- **Read Romans 14:1-15:6** – See how the Apostle Paul applies the truth about conscience to “adiaphora,” that is, things that God has neither forbidden nor commanded.
- **Read 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1** – The Apostle Paul has a long discussion on conscience and the use of our Christian freedom.

### GroupWork

1. Share the highs and lows of your summer so far.
2. Read Romans 2:14-15. The requirements of God’s law are written on \_\_\_\_\_.
  - Your conscience is “a voice within you which bears witness to God’s law” (*Luther’s Catechism* by David P. Kuske, question 19).
  - Your conscience is the judge within you that approves or disapproves of your actions, based on the law of God as you understand it.
  - Martin Luther said, “To go against conscience is neither right nor safe.”

Discuss these ideas to better understand the importance of conscience and the power of conscience.

3. Read 1 Corinthians 8 and Paul’s application of conscience. Paul was concerned that a person would go against his/her conscience by eating food sacrificed to idols. Why do you think he began the discussion with the comment, “Knowledge puffs up while love builds up” (1 Corinthians 8:1)?
4. Read Psalm 143. An accusing conscience can be like an enemy that pursues and crushes you (see verses 2-4). The closing petition (verses 11 & 12) mentions “your name’s sake,” “your righteousness,” and “your unfailing love.” Discuss how these terms/truths can be helpful to silence an accusing conscience.
5. Read Romans 5:1-2. What does it mean to you to know that, even though convicted by your conscience, you stand in grace like standing in the Winner’s Circle?
6. Break up into groups of two or three. Is there a burden on your conscience that you would like to share in this smaller, intimate group? Is there a sinful pattern in your life that you would like this group to pray about, asking for God’s deliverance for you?