

Dear members and friends of St. John Lutheran,

The dictionary defines “conscience” as “the part of the mind that makes you aware of your actions as being either morally right or wrong” (Merriam-Webster). Of course, that’s an extremely simple definition of a much more complex part of human existence. The troubled conscience can cause us to grieve or be distressed. It can affect how we look at the world, and even our future. While all humans receive a conscience, **the health of the Christian conscience** (our ability to reflect on our past thoughts or actions in relation to our life with God and with others) is very important. Dr. Martin Luther warned that it is very dangerous to go against the conscience. The reason: The Spirit of God that indwells uses the conscience as an **early warning system**. We can look at the temptation before us, and discern it as evil in God’s sight. Going against this warning is playing with **willful sin** – the notion that we can freely reject God’s law or our governmental laws and regulations – without harm to our soul. When we have a healthy conscience, we Christians have a powerful tool to help us live a life that is good and pleasing to God and all. Let’s examine both the healthy and unhealthy conscience.

First, let’s examine the **troubled conscience**. We Christians are not perfect. We don’t always do or say what we should. Our selfishness or the desires of the flesh get in the way of living for God and for others. And so, we fall into sin. The healthy Christian conscience will be troubled when confronted with this sin. This of course leads to something important: public confession of sin. We have sorrow over what we have done, and a desire to make things right. The Gospel comes to the troubled soul (as witnessed by a troubled conscience) and provides true healing. The Gospel reminds us that our Lord Jesus had to die with that very sin on the cross. We recognize our life as being connected to His very death and resurrection. Our guilt is removed by a loving God, who wants us to live guilt-free. And so, the troubled conscience is **not** a sign of an unhealthy conscience, but of **one that is working to keep us alive in Christ**.

Next, we have the **calloused conscience**. From the book, *Has American Christianity Failed?* (CPH: St. Louis, c. 2016), author Rev. Bryan Wolfmueller states, “Through continued sinning, our conscience becomes calloused or hardened. St. Paul calls this a “seared” conscience (1 Timothy 4:2).” How many people do you know who **live in willful sin**? They openly defy God’s holy word or the just laws that our government has put in place for our good. They may live with another person (same or opposite gender) outside of holy wedlock, cheat the government or their neighbor, or commit other blatant offenses that defy what we know is good and right behavior. The calloused conscience has **lost the sensation of guilt**. It has ceased to feel the pain of sin. Above, we said that going against the conscience, and willfully sinning is dangerous, because it can lead to a calloused conscience.

Another unhealthy condition is the **evil conscience**. Again, Wolfmueller writes, “[this is] **a conscience that accuses where it should not**. The devil knows Law and Gospel, and he perfectly confuses them to give us an evil, or bad, conscience.” This begins with temptation. We are tempted to sin, and the devil preaches a false Gospel that eases the pathway to this sin. The devil: “After all, God is a loving God and knows that you are not going to always do good! Don’t worry! God will not get mad at you. No one will be hurt by a little sin like that!” Then, after the sin is committed, the devil comes back with the full force of the Law: “You call yourself a Christian? Just look at what you did! You’re a disgrace! God could never love you like you are!” The Christian with an evil conscience confuses Law and Gospel.

He or she cannot receive the instruction and prohibitions of the Law properly, and is incapable of receiving the comfort of knowing that Jesus indeed died with that very sin. The Christian with the evil conscience imagines that **they must do something to make things right between them and God.** They seek to “double down” on the Law as a solution to the idea that “God can’t possibly love me!” But this merely leads to more guilt as additional sins are committed and deeper feelings of being unworthy of God’s love.

The solution to the evil conscience is **the means of grace.** God can penetrate the heart and mind of even the most troubled, calloused, or evil conscience. The Christian is led by the Spirit to see the truth about sin and God’s Law, and the absolute forgiveness that comes from the cross. There is no sin too great for God to forgive. His love for us is unconditional and complete. God comes to the evil conscience and removes it so that we can live in His grace and love (Hebrews 10:21-22).

Finally, we have the **counterfeit conscience.** This is the person who imagines that they can become “good” apart from the forgiveness of sins (found only in the cross of Christ, through God’s means of grace). This person indeed knows that they sometimes do or say the wrong thing. They sometimes fail to do what they know they should have done. But they comfort themselves by looking at the good that they have accomplished. Non-Christians or agnostics (those who are uncertain if God is real) often develop a counterfeit conscience, as they occasionally add the “good deed” to make up for any bad they’ve done. Give money to charity, help a stranger in need, and other examples of “good” makes the “internal ledger that they keep” show black, instead of red. This person is dead spiritually. There is no life, even if they imagine themselves to be “a Christian.” Only the truth that comes from the harshness of the Law (if we’ve failed to keep even one of God’s laws, we’ve failed to keep *all* of them), and the wonder of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (His complete forgiveness through His shed blood) can bring this person to life in Christ (Hebrews 9:14).

God wants us to be spiritually healthy. And that means He desires that our consciences are healthy. God’s means of grace – hearing the Gospel read and preached, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper – is how God cleanses us and keeps us healthy. We need to be in worship and in so doing, receive His healing medicine. By His grace, He keeps us on the narrow road that leads to heaven.

Pastor Travis