

ROMANS 2:14–15. (Luther 1522)

For when the heathens, who do not have the law, and yet do by nature what is in the law, as long as they do not have the law, they are a law for themselves, thus showing that the law's work is written in their heart, since their conscience testifies about them, as do their thoughts, which go back and forth accusing or excusing themselves.

I remember once hearing a pastor say that one could say that what spurred on the entire Reformation was Martin Luther's extremely sensitive conscience.

Is that true? And if so, how could one sensitive conscience spur on a far-reaching movement like that? This morning we want to consider how that could happen, and in so doing to consider just what a blessing the conscience is.

But we can't consider what a *blessing* the conscience is without first knowing *what* a conscience is. The apostle Paul tells us here. (Read the verses.) Paul tells us that even if we are people who do not have God's word and have no acquaintance with God's word, we still carry around one key doctrine of God's word in our hearts—the law. What God requires in his law has been written in our hearts. Now, his law isn't written on our physical hearts, so that if you peeled back your skin over your chest cavity, you could examine your heart and say, "Sure enough, look! There's the First Table of his law written in my atria, and the Second Table written in my ventricles! I think that's Times New Roman!" No, saying his law is written in our hearts is to say that it's part of the library of our spiritual existence. It's part and parcel of our life of thought and feeling, reflection and analysis. It is written in our spiritual library that we should love God with all we are and have, and we should love our neighbor as ourself.

But that in itself wouldn't really affect us. We also need a spiritual mediator between this spiritual library and our conscious thought and feeling. That's why God has also given everyone a conscience. The conscience is a spiritual organ with a fourfold job.

First, it reads the work required by God's law written on the heart. The conscience sits there in his chair with his glasses on the edge of his nose diligently reading God's law.

Second, it examines everything we are doing. So the conscience doesn't just sit there in his chair with his glasses, but alternates between that and going to his window with his binoculars and looking out at our lives, carefully examining everything.

Third, it diligently compares the two. The conscience doesn't alternate between the book in his chair and looking at our life through the window as two unrelated activities. No, he's constantly going from the window back to his book to compare what he has seen with what is written in the book.

Fourth, it testifies about that comparison by either making us feel good, if there is agreement between God's law and our life, or feel bad, if God's law and our life conflict and clash with each other. It's like the conscience has a direct phone line to our conscious thought and feeling on the table next to his chair. If he likes the comparison he sees, he gets on the phone and cheers and encourages us. If he doesn't like the comparison, he gets on the phone and yells in disappointment and makes annoying noises to bother us.

Now, ever since the fall into sin, this process doesn't work perfectly. First, our hearts are corrupt by nature, so the conscience isn't always able to read God's law clearly and accurately.

It's like the difference between a skilled artist engraving an inscription on a perfectly smooth surface and then engraving that same inscription on a rocky, jagged surface. The problem in the second case isn't with his engraving skill. The problem is with the engraving surface. The same is true of our sinful hearts. As the conscience reads the book of God's law in his chair, it is sometimes difficult to read. So he may from time to time make a wrong comparison and thus send the wrong message on his direct line. He may cheer us and encourage us when we are actually doing something wrong, and he may annoy and bother us when we are actually doing something right. This is why we also need God's word—not only for the gospel, which is not written on our hearts, but also for the law, which is. God's word doesn't lie, so his word helps to sharpen the wording in the book in our hearts, and thereby also makes sure our conscience is reading the book correctly.

Another problem is that, ever since the fall into sin, even when we know that something is right and it makes us feel good, that doesn't automatically lead us to do it. And even when we know something is wrong and we feel horrible about it, that doesn't automatically stop us from doing it. Hardened criminals and pathological liars, for instance, are often people who have ignored their conscience and essentially told it to shut up so often that even though it's still doing its work, it barely utters a timid whisper when it picks up the direct line.

And there's one other problem, illustrated well in the life of Martin Luther. The other problem is when our conscience is working as well as it can work in a fallen world, which means that we are aware of our many wrongdoings and keenly feel the guilt of them, but we don't know what to do about that guilt, or where to go with it.

Martin Luther's keen conscience and the guilt it caused him first led him to abandon a promising legal career and instead to enter an Augustinian monastery to become a monk. It was even a reformed monastery, which didn't mean anything having to do with the Reformation, but simply meant that the rules of the order were strictly followed. But following the rules of the order didn't quiet Luther's conscience. He tried to find peace in confessing his sins to his father confessor, but according to Roman Catholic theology, your confession isn't perfectly valid and so your absolution also isn't perfectly valid, unless you confess all your sins perfectly and completely. Luther later recalled that he once confessed for six hours. Sometimes he would be leaving the confessional when he would remember a sin he had forgotten to confess. So back to the confessional he ran. Luther also tried to quiet his conscience through fasting. He would often take neither a drop of water nor a morsel of bread for three days at a time.

Luther said that if ever there were a monk who could attain his goal with his efforts, he would have been that monk.

But none of what he did satisfied his conscience. His conscience was still constantly on the direct line, yelling its disappointment, telling him correctly that all his effort wasn't enough, and making annoying and bothersome noise. So Luther did not have peace. He did not have certainty that God was pleased with him. This constant falling short of his goal then also tempted him to hate God for making such exacting demands and putting such an enormous burden on him without relief, which only made him feel even more guilty.

But it was precisely his desire to quiet and soothe his conscience that led Luther to his rediscovery of the gospel. Occasionally his father confessor would point him to God's mercy, perhaps for no other reason than to try and shorten his confessions. But it made an impression on

Luther. And Luther's guilty conscience also led him to read the Bible thoroughly, carefully, and often. It was while studying Romans 1, where Paul says that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel, that Luther finally came to the realization that there is another kind of righteousness besides righteousness through the law, another kind besides the righteousness that is impossible to obtain. This other kind of righteousness is the righteousness of Jesus Christ which God freely gives to us as a gift through faith alone, not by works, so that no one can boast except in the Lord.

Luther said that this realization was like being transported from the depths of hell to the heights of heaven. It wasn't until he discovered this completely free and unconditional gospel that he finally found peace. Now he had a way to quiet and soothe his conscience. Now he had certainty about his status with God. Now he had the sure hope of heaven in the afterlife.

It wasn't that his conscience didn't bother him anymore. It's just that now it didn't rule him and drive him to the brink of despair, and he knew exactly where to go to satisfy it and to quiet and soothe it—to Jesus Christ. Oftentimes this meant that he still went to the confessional. In fact he continued this regular practice throughout his life. But now instead of trying to find his peace in whether he had perfectly and completely enumerated all his sins, he found his peace in the forgiveness announced to him in the name of Jesus by his pastor, Pastor Bugenhagen. His awareness of his sins just made him that much more aware of just how deep the love of his Savior was, that much more grateful to have a Savior whose forgiveness could never be exhausted.

500 years ago this year, Luther preached from the pulpit in Wittenberg: "I will not allow anyone to take private confession away from me, and I would not give it up for all the treasures in the world, since I know what comfort and strength it has given me. No one knows what it can do for him except one who has struggled often and long with the devil. Yes, the devil would have slain me long ago, if the confession had not sustained me." This is why Lutheranism has still retained and still encourages the practice of voluntary private confession, because for many people, simply participating in a general confession and hearing a general absolution doesn't quiet their conscience. It is only when they confess what is specifically plaguing them to God's servant and hear God's servant assure them in person that Jesus died for and took away those sins too, that their conscience finally hangs up the phone.

I've mostly been sharing with you the experiences of Martin Luther, a man who lived five centuries ago. Yet you have all been listening attentively and relating his story to yourselves. Why is that? It's because it really wasn't just one conscience that spurred on this far-reaching movement known as the Reformation. It was the fact that everyone has a conscience that spurred it on. It was the fact that when Luther restored the gospel of Jesus Christ to prominence in order to comfort consciences, he was preaching and teaching and writing to people who did in fact have consciences that needed comforting.

And that's still true today. The conscience is actually one of the greatest entrance points for us to go back to the basics of what the Christian faith is all about. It's about a good conscience. It's about peace with God and the sure hope of heaven through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So the conscience also one of the greatest entrance points for evangelism that we have. You believe that the entire universe gradually evolved into its present

state over billions of years and that our existence is basically just a fortunate accident? Okay, then how do you explain your conscience, and the fact that everyone else has one too? And that all of our consciences, no matter where in the world we grew up, basically revolve around the same standards? And how are you satisfactorily able to soothe it? You believe that morality is relative and that you can express yourself sexually however you want? Okay, then why don't you want to hear about the morality God demands in his word? Why does it make you uncomfortable or angry? And how are you satisfactorily able to soothe your conscience? Instead of grabbing the bottle or cranking the volume louder on your headphones or covering your ears or chasing entertainment until your eyes bug out of your skull or frantically trying to find peace in your own works and activism like Luther initially did, why not find peace for good in the only place it can be truly found?

When Jesus noted in John 6 that everyone was leaving him and asked his disciples if they wanted to leave too, and Peter said, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life," what was Peter basically saying? "Lord, you're the only one who can and does give us a good conscience before God. You're the only one who can and does make us certain of our status with God. You're the only one who can and does give us the sure hope of heaven. I might want to argue with some of your teachings now and then, and now and then they might make me want to leave you, but this is what keeps me from doing so. This is what keeps bringing me back to you. You alone give us a good conscience."

What a blessing our conscience is! It makes us aware of our sins and shortcomings, and thereby it drives us to the only place where we can dump them all for good. It drives us to the gospel, to the cross of Jesus Christ, where we find, as Luther loved to say, not a piddly Savior for piddly and inconsequential sins, but a great, real, and magnificent Savior from great, real, and terrible sins. Yes, let our conscience find ten thousand more sins, each one of them ten thousand times worse than those we are already aware of. It will only succeed in making Christ ten thousand times brighter and more beautiful, and his love ten thousand times deeper. In baptism the apostle Peter says I and all who are baptized in the name of the triune God have the pledge of a good conscience before God. Through faith in Christ, the direct line on the table next to the chair of my conscience goes dead. Even if my conscience won't defend me, Jesus is always defending me at the right hand of God, on the basis of his righteousness.

One extremely sensitive conscience, you could say, spurred on an entire, far-reaching movement. Let your one sensitive conscience spur on a lifetime of thanksgiving and praise to your Savior Jesus Christ, until the day your conscience never can accuse again, when you are taken safely to your Savior's side in heaven. Amen.