

A Clear Conscience

by Ray C. Stedman

The ninth chapter of Hebrews may seem to many to be involved and even confusing, but it was perfectly clear to the Hebrew readers to whom this letter was first written. It describes, in rather close detail, the tabernacle in the wilderness with its sacrifices and regulations of food, drink, and clothing, and therefore seems difficult to us and even a little dull. But it will help greatly to see what the author is driving at. If we start there we shall have everything in perspective. That point is made clear in Verses 13 and 14:

For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh [in the tabernacle of old], how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God. {Heb 9:13-14 RSV}

The practical effect of Christ's ministry to us is given in these words, "to purify your conscience from dead works." The problem that is faced in this passage, therefore, is how to handle a nagging conscience.

We each have a conscience. We may not be able to analyze it, and we certainly cannot control it, but we know we all possess one. Conscience has been defined as "that still, small voice that makes you feel smaller still," or, as one little boy put it, "It is that which feels bad when everything else feels good." Conscience is that internal voice that sits in judgment over our will. There is a very common myth abroad that says that conscience is the means by which we tell what is right and what is wrong. But conscience is never that. It is *training* that tells us what is right or wrong. But when we know what is right or wrong, it is our conscience that insists that we do what we think is

right and avoid what we think is wrong. That distinction is very important and needs to be made clear.

Conscience can be very mistaken; it is not a safe guide by itself. It accuses us when we violate whatever moral standard we may have, but that moral standard may be quite wrong when viewed in the light of God's revelation. But conscience also gives approval whenever we fulfill whatever standard we have, though that standard is right or wrong. And conscience, we have all discovered, acts both before and after the fact – it can either prod or punish.

In the case of these Hebrews, the problem is not over wrongdoing, it is not a conscience troubled over evil deeds, but "dead works." We must remember that the readers of this letter are Christians who already know how to handle the problem of sins. When they become aware that they have deliberately disobeyed what they knew to be right, they know the only way they can quiet an avenging conscience is to confess the sin before God, and deal with the problem immediately. That aspect of a troubled conscience can easily be taken care of by Christians as they accept the forgiving grace of God. But the problem here is a conscience plagued with guilt over good left undone – not sins of commission, but sins of omission.

These people try to put their conscience to rest by religious activity; they are goaded by an uneasy conscience into a high gear program in order to please God. Here are people who are intent on doing what is right, and thus pleasing God, and they have therefore launched upon an intensive program of religious activity which may range all the way from bead-counting and candle-burning to serving on committees, passing out tracts, and teaching Sunday school classes. What perceptible difference in motive is there between a poor, blinded pagan who, in his misconception of truth, crawls

endlessly down a road to placate God, and an American Christian who busies himself in a continual round of activity to try to win a sense of acceptance before God? None whatsoever!

A woman said to me recently, "I don't know what is the matter with me. I do all I can to serve the Lord but I still feel guilty, and then I feel guilty about feeling guilty!"

Precisely! It is rather discouraging, is it not, to see that all this laudable effort on our part is dismissed here as "dead works." It is disconcerting to see that such effort is not acceptably serving God. God is not impressed by our feverish effort.

What do you do when this is your problem? Certainly not try harder; that is the worst thing you could do.

Perhaps now we are ready to listen to what the writer says about the poverty of activity. Let us start at the first of the chapter. The problem, he points out, is not the nature of what we do, it is not activity itself for there was, in the Old Testament, a **God-authorized place of activity:**

Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. For a tent was prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence; it is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain stood a tent called the Holy of Holies, having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, which contained a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant; above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. {Heb 9:1-5 RSV}

And neither can we!

The point he makes is, there was nothing wrong with the activity of worship in the tabernacle; it was God-authorized, and perfectly proper. Also, there were **God-authorized regulations:**

These preparations having thus been made, the priests go continually into the outer tent, performing their ritual duties; but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood which he offers for himself and for the errors of the people. By this the

Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary is not yet opened as long as the outer tent is still standing (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper, but deal only with food and drink and various ablutions, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation. {Heb 9:6-10 RSV}

All of these activities had to do with the Old Testament, the worship in the tabernacle, and the regulations connected with it. But the writer is simply pointing out there were three drastic limitations to these:

- First, if these Old Testament worshippers saw no deeper than the ordinance they were performing, the only benefit would be to the body. The writer says, "According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot perfect the conscience ... but deal only with food and drink and various ablutions, *regulations for the body.*" Because these affected only the outer man, there was no change in the inner man. The performance of a service, a ritual, a sacrifice, or an ordinance, does not do anything to the performer, it only affects the part of the body involved in the performance.

In baptism the whole body is cleansed; if it is kneeling or bowing then only the part of the body involved is affected. This is his argument: no ritual or ordinance has value in itself. This needs to be declared again and again in the hearing of men. We are so convinced that God places value in ordinances. No, the writer says that even in this God-authorized system there was no value in what was done. He makes that very clear. The conscience was not touched and therefore gave the worshipper no rest, continually hounding him, making him feel guilty, dragging him back to perform the same thing over and over again in a restless search for peace.

It was like a man who goes down and buys a new suit every time he needs a bath. His solution never touches the real problem, but keeps covering it over. Eventually that kind of a person becomes very difficult to live with, as are also those who place value on ordinances.

- The second point he makes is, these ordinances were intended to have a deeper message. They are symbolic, he says, for the present age. No ritual had meaning in itself, it had meaning in what it stood for, that is the point. It was intended to convey a deeper message. The tabernacle worship, with all these strange provisions – the bread, the incense, the offerings, the ornate building itself with its altars – all was a kind of religious play enacted to teach the people what was going on in their inner life. They were not to place importance upon the outward drama – that was only a play – it was what it stood for that was important. But they completely missed the point and thought God was interested in the ritual. In Chapter 10, the author of Hebrews will say very plainly, “in burnt offerings and sin offerings thou hast taken no pleasure,” {Heb 10:6 RSV}. God was never interested in ritual. It meant nothing to him.
- The third point he makes is that these things will never touch the conscience, reach the inner man, or do anything effective until men accept this fact that religious activity, i.e., ritual, is only a picture and has no value in itself at all. As he says, “The Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary [the real inner man] was not yet opened as long as the outer tent [the tabernacle] is still standing.” “Is still standing” is a mistranslation; it should be “still has any standing.” That is the proper idea, “still has any value in their sight.” In other words, they could never see what God was driving at as long as they had their attention focused on the ritual. They could never realize the value intended until they saw behind the ritual to what God was saying. Until they saw the total worthlessness of outward things to do anything for them, they could never begin to appropriate the real message.

There are some in the Old Testament who did see this. You cannot read David’s experience recorded in the 51st Psalm without seeing that he understood this. That psalm was written after the terrible twin failure of adultery and murder into which he fell. And he was the king! In the Psalm

he confesses that God brought conviction to his heart, yet he says,

For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. {Psa 51:16-17 KJV}

David understood the worthlessness of mere ritual. That is why he is called “a man after God’s own heart,” {cf, Acts 13:22}. But the rest of the people, by and large, missed the point. So they were goaded by their conscience into an endless routine of religious activity, until they came near despair.

In contrast to this, the writer sets before us **the power of reality:**

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? {Heb 9:11-14 RSV}

Do you see the argument? He is saying the first arrangement, depending upon the activity of the worshipper (that is the point) affected only the body. If there is something you are trying to do for God, it is your activity on his behalf, all it ever affects is the outer man, the body. It never quiets the conscience. It cannot, for it does not get below the surface; it does not touch that area. But the second arrangement, the new constitution by which Christians are to live, depends not on the work of the worshipper but on the activity of Christ in our place! Therefore it moves through the man. When the conscience, in there, is confronted with the value of Christ’s blood, it has nothing to say! Do you see the point?

He is declaring that our activity adds nothing to our acceptance before God. God does not like us

better because we serve him. Oh, to get this point across! Our service, our faithful work on his behalf, our labors, our diligent efforts to do something for God, never make him think one bit better or worse of us. God does not love you because you serve him; God loves you because he is love! He accepts you because you believe in Christ. That is the only reason. Therefore, *servicing is no more a duty*, but if we see it in that light *it becomes delight*.

Listen to these helpful words from a recent article in the *Sunday School Times*, entitled "The Great Saboteur," detailing the work of Satan as the great accuser of the brethren, the one who stimulates the conscience to nag, drive, goad and prod us, and to keep us feeling a vague sense of hazy, undefined guilt before God. That is the work of the accuser, the saboteur. Concerning that there come these revealing sentences:

Scripture recognizes, as the Accuser also does, that nothing so impedes your access to God as a guilty conscience. You can't draw near boldly unless your heart is "sprinkled from an evil conscience." Therefore, if you want to overcome Satan at this point, don't just talk to him about the blood of Christ.

Instead, accept the fact that the blood of Christ completely satisfies God about you. Remind yourself that God welcomes you into his presence not on the grounds of your Christian progress, the depth of your knowledge, or even the degree of victory you have found, but on the grounds of the blood of the Lamb.

The discovery of this glorious secret has enabled saints down the ages to overcome the Accuser, "they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb." They did not remind him of the blood of Christ, they reminded themselves. They refused to wilt before his accusations and were, therefore, able to enjoy free access to the throne of grace and full liberty in their service.

That is helpful, is it not? These overcomers did not keep looking always at their inner condition, they looked rather to the solution that God had given to the problem.

Right at this point any thoughtful person will raise a question which frequently nags Christians, and is often voiced by the enemies of Christian faith. Someone may well ask, "Why does this have

to be by blood? Why is a death necessary?" The Christian gospel rests upon the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and this fact has been a source of much criticism, and a stumbling block to many people. Christianity has been sneeringly referred to as "the religion of the slaughterhouse," and the gospel has been called "the gospel of gore" because of this continual emphasis upon the need for blood, for death. It is this **mark of finality** which the writer now examines:

Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant. For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. Hence even the first covenant was not ratified without blood. For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you." And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. {Heb 9:15-23 RSV}

Without a death, he argues, it is not possible to receive the benefits of the covenant God makes. For, he points out, no will that is written can bestow any benefits until after the death of the maker.

I recently met with a group of men and women to whom the Director of a Christian Conference Center was explaining certain of the procedures involved in securing additional property for the expansion of the ministry. He described one case where a deed had been executed by the owner of the property, a widow. He explained that she was to be paid an annuity until her death, and on her death

the property would become the property of the Conference Association. Someone immediately raised his hand and facetiously asked, “How healthy is she?” The question was not in good taste, but it illustrates the point. Wills are of no value to the beneficiaries until the death of the testator, the will maker. This is what the writer here argues.

You cannot avail yourself of all that Jesus Christ provides for you in terms of release from a guilty conscience, unless there is a death. The will is useless without it. In fact, he says, death is so important that even the shadow, the picture in the Old Testament, required blood. Not, of course, the blood of Jesus Christ, but the blood of bulls and goats. Blood is inescapable.

Now that brings us to the point: Why? We shall never come to the answer till we squarely face the implications of the substitutionary character of the death of Jesus Christ. His death was not for his own sake, it was for ours. He was our representative. It was not so much his blood that was shed, but ours. This is what God is so desperately trying to convey to us.

The cross is God’s way of saying there is nothing in us worth saving at all, apart from Christ – no salvageable content whatsoever. He takes us as we are, men and women apart from Christ, and he says, “There is nothing you can do for me, not one thing.” For when Christ became what we are, when he was “made sin for us” {cf, 2 Cor 5:21}, God passed sentence upon him, and put him to death. This is God’s eloquent way of saying to us, “There is nothing to please me in yourself; there is not a thing you can do by your own effort that is worth a thing.” All that we can ever be, without Christ, is totally set aside. Death eliminates us, wipes us out.

That is why our activity does not improve our relationship with him in the least degree. It does not make us any more acceptable, even though it is activity for him. See what this does to our human pride. It cuts the ground right out from under us.

Who has not heard Christians talking in such a way as to give the impression that the greatest thing that ever happened to God was the day he found them. But we are not indispensable to him; he is indispensable to us. And the great truth to which this brings us is: If we become bankrupt to do anything for God, we are then able to receive everything from him. That is what he wants us to see.

That is why Verse 14 closes with this wonderful sentence, “the blood of Christ ... purifies our conscience *to serve the living God.*” The gospel is that he has made himself available to us, to do everything in us, as a living God. “Faithful is he who calls you, who also will do it,” {cf, 1 Th 5:24}. The one who calls you to do something is the one who intends to do it, through you. Therefore, let us stop thinking we have to depend on *our* intellect, *our* ability, *our* gifts, *our* talents, or *our* anything, and start reckoning on his ability to supply what we lack to do what he asks. We can say with Paul, “I can do all things through Christ, who strengtheneth me,” {cf, Phil 4:13}. Do you understand that? What a relief that is!

But the point of the whole passage is:

- If we refuse to reckon this way, to count this to be true,
- If we refuse this,
- Then there are no benefits of the new covenant available to us.

A covenant is not in effect until there is the death of the testator, the death of the will maker. It is we, through Christ our representative, who died that death. But

- If we will not accept it,
- If we will not agree to this and accept God’s sentence of death upon all that we are,
- Then we cannot have the benefits.

That is what he is saying. If we fight this sentence of death, for the rest of our Christian lives we shall be troubled with a guilty conscience. We will never rest in any final acceptance before God. We shall always be wrestling with the problem of whether we have done enough and have been pleasing to God by our activity. But if we accept this, the effect is to render service pure delight.

A mission leader and I were recently discussing a young man whose very obvious, evident, earnest desire is to be used of God. This young man desperately hopes to be used, he wants to be in a place of leadership, he wants to exercise power in his

ministry. But every time he is given the opportunity to try, somehow something about the way he does it, and the attitude he displays in it, immediately begins to create personality problems. Every effort he makes along this line comes to nothing. Eventually, he himself is overwhelmed with a sense of frustration and utter defeat. The reason he experiences this over and over is simply because he will not accept the fact that is proclaimed here – that God has ruled him out, that there are no talents he has that he can employ in any service, any worthwhile, acceptable service to God. As long as he is still struggling to use his abilities to do something for God it will never be acceptable – and neither will yours, nor mine!

By contrast, I sat yesterday and listened to another young man and his wife tell about how God had brought them through various struggles and trials until they had come to the place where, as he said, “Three months ago God broke through and I learned something that I have known all my life but I didn’t understand up till this point. I have learned what is the meaning of that verse, ‘If any man will come after me, let him deny himself.’ I always thought that meant self-denial, that meant giving up certain things or places or position for Christ, but I never learned until now that it means I must deny my self, that I have no right to my self, that I have no abilities in my self, but that I can have every-

thing in Christ. My life from that moment on has been a totally different thing.” His wife, sitting by his side, kept nodding her head and smiling, which is the greatest testimony of all that this works.

Look on to the end of the book, in Chapter 13, that well-known doxology we quote so frequently:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working you [there is the secret] that which is pleasing in his sight. {Heb 13:20-22 RSV}

That is the secret of a clear conscience.

Prayer:

Our Father, open our eyes to this new principle of human behavior. Teach us to grasp this, Lord, and to accept thy sentence of death upon everything in us that is not of Christ, and to recognize that in him, by him, through him we can do everything that needs to be done by us – through him who loved us and who strengthens us. In his name, Amen.

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