

THE HEALTHY SOUL, PART 13: CONSCIENCE

1 Samuel 24:1-22 (NASB)

David Bruce Linn, Pastor-Teacher

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Years ago my older son, Christopher, did a project for a junior high science fair. The experiment was to test the refractivity of different viscosity liquids by shooting a laser beam through them and measuring the angle of deflection. Of course, a laser beam traveling through air is invisible until it hits something. But the beam can clearly be seen if it is passing through dust, fog, or smoke. The first time we shot the laser through some single-weight motor oil of known viscosity we placed a clear plastic cover over the whole thing and then tried to figure out how to see the laser.

I wanted to use dry ice, but we didn't have any. We tried different aerosol sprays, but they dissipated too fast. We tried talcum powder but the particles landed too fast. Smoke was our next option. I remembered that I had a pack of cigarettes! Back when I was the unofficial chaplain of the Pearl River, New York, ambulance corps, I used to offer EMTs who were smokers money for the cigarettes in their possession if they would try to quit for a week. I promised to pray for them every day. I would write their name in permanent marker on their pack and place it on my dresser so I would see it every morning.

I retrieved the one pack I had left which read: "Susan," who was still trying to quit. I lit a cigarette in my hand and tried to make it work that way to no avail. Then I put it in my mouth--I did not inhale!-- and easily filled the clear compartment with smoke. The moment my younger son, Alex, saw the picture of his dad with a lit cigarette on his lips he began to scream: "No, Dad, no!" at the top of his lungs. He was so upset we could not calm him down. While he was shouting, I switched on the laser, and it looked great! You could see the beam perfectly. But obviously we would have to get some dry ice.

For the record, I do not now nor have I ever smoked. But after discussing Alex's concern with him, I learned that his elementary school had equipped him with a very clear standard which operated on two levels. They had trained him to think that smoking would kill you, and more, that it is wrong to smoke. The training worked! His intellect had the information, but more important than that, they had trained his conscience so well that he screamed out loud.

What I want to know is why, every time a highly-trained medical doctor who swore to "first do no harm" is about to do an abortion, his or her conscience does not scream out in the same way: "No, Larry, you cannot do this!" "No, Muriel, this is a human being!" Why do the assisting nurses not scream out loud? Why does the receptionist not call out involuntarily? Why do not the mothers who are bringing their babies to be killed curl up on the floor with a pang of conscience so powerful that they cannot stand up straight? Why do not the fathers who have been complicit killing their own children not feel an unstoppable wave of revulsion at taking a human life, spilling innocent blood, and offending a holy God? Why are not legislators in every governmental chamber refusing to do anything else until the practice of elective abortion is stopped?

Obviously, our consciences have been trained to do something else. Some other standard has

been so powerfully introduced that we are willing to override the natural impulse to avoid killing babies! We have allowed our love to be frozen and the fear of offending a holy God to be put to sleep. Since 1973 when the fraudulent Roe v. Wade case was decided, America has aborted over fifty million babies—multiple times more than everyone killed in all of the wars our nation has ever fought. I also grieve for the thousands of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last few years. But that number is dwarfed by the number of abortions in America. Where is the conscience of our nation?

THINGS A HEALTHY CONSCIENCE SHOULD AVOID

An episode in the life of King David of Israel teaches us that for any man or woman to have a healthy soul he or she must have a healthy conscience, that inner voice which guides outward behavior. The scenario is that Israel, as an act of unbelief, had demanded a human king instead of the kingship of God. God gave them Saul to discipline them, a man who looked good and could lead but who had no heart for God. After a number of serious offenses against God, the Lord removed his divine establishment as king though he was still in office. In his place, the Lord appointed the shepherd boy, David. King Saul could not tolerate the idea that his divinely-appointed successor was rattling around his kingdom, just waiting for him to die. So periodically Saul would sally forth with a contingent of soldiers and try to track David down in his hiding place in the wilderness to kill him.

We pick up the story there: **"Now when Saul returned from pursuing the Philistines, he was told, saying, 'Behold, David is in the wilderness of Engedi.' Then Saul took three thousand chosen men from all Israel and went to seek David and his men in front of the Rocks of the Wild Goats. He came to the sheepfolds on the way, where there was a cave; and Saul went in to relieve himself. Now David and his men were sitting in the inner recesses of the cave. The men of David said to him, 'Behold, this is the day of which the LORD said to you, "Behold; I am about to give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it seems good to you."' Then David arose and cut off the edge of Saul's robe secretly. It came about afterward that David's conscience bothered him because he had cut off the edge of Saul's robe. So he said to his men, 'Far be it from me because of the LORD that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD'S anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, since he is the LORD'S anointed'" (1 Samuel 24:1-6).**

The first aspect of a healthy conscience is that it helps us avoid solving personal problems by immoral means. After having Saul make multiple attempts to murder David one might think that David would have justification to kill Saul any way he could. Not so. David's conscience intervened just as the opportunity arose.

But think of how inconvenient it was for Saul to remain alive! David had already been anointed the new king by Samuel, and yet he had to live in the desert until Saul should pass away. And at any time Saul or one of his servants could have risen up to kill David. David might have been tempted to think something I have heard many people say: "I need to take my life back!" And that would mean getting Saul's inconvenient life out of the way.

This is how most abortions occur. Very few have any connection to anyone's health. Most unwanted pregnancies happen when people do not even bother to use a contraceptive. It would be tragic enough to have babies lost due to unavoidable health dilemmas, but it beggars words to think that the vast majority of aborted babies lose their God-given lives because they are inconvenient. In our

technology-driven culture we do many things simply because we can. There is little chance of effective legislation to restrict abortions. This practice will change only when enough people have their consciences restored to the point that they will choose to overcome the temptation to make their lives easier.

If you want to have a healthy soul you must begin listening carefully to your conscience. If you choose not to respond to it, you will deaden it. Alarm bells went off in David's head, and he chose to listen to them. If we ignore them often enough we will not hear them any more. Did you ever do something wrong about which your conscience used to bother you and realize that you had no pang of conscience about it? That is a very dangerous condition. Many people in our nation are that way with respect to abortion.

The second benefit of David's healthy conscience was that it helped him to prevent the sinful acts of others, as the story goes on to say: "**David persuaded his men with these words and did not allow them to rise up against Saul. And Saul arose, left the cave, and went on his way**" (1 Samuel 24:7). This was a choice which David had to make. He knew personally that he could not murder Saul, but he could have been crafty and allowed his men to do it. They, also, saw Saul's life as inconvenient because they were stuck in the wilderness as long as David was. The moment Saul died they would move into military quarters on the temple mount or nearby. David wisely used his influence to prevent his men from committing an act he knew to be sin.

This is a favorite dodge of weak-kneed government leaders. They say: "Well, I'm against abortion personally." But they will not lift a finger to prevent others from committing an act they know to be immoral. We should see the triggering of our conscience as a precious thing which prevents us from solving our personal problems by committing evil acts, and we should use our personal influence to help others choose the right thing as well.

THINGS A HEALTHY CONSCIENCE SHOULD DO

We turn now to affirmative actions which a healthy conscience should help us to do. As we do these things they have value not only for ourselves but those around us. The story continues: "**Now afterward David arose and went out of the cave and called after Saul, saying, 'My lord the king!' And when Saul looked behind him, David bowed with his face to the ground and prostrated himself**" (1 Samuel 24:8). Some part of David's emotions may have wanted to call out: "Hey, you murderous moron!" He chose to speak respectfully to Saul as the Lord's anointed, and he bowed in submission to display his respect even to those not close enough to hear what he said. It is very hard for someone to listen to us when we keep up a steady stream of critical judgment against him or her.

Our attitude and outward actions determine whether anyone will listen to us when we speak about any matter of conscience. This is a very frustrating aspect of speaking about abortion as the church in America. Millions of people who have no fear of God call themselves evangelicals. The statistics indicate, if they are lumped together with the real Christians, that evangelicals seem to have sex outside marriage, abort babies, and divorce almost as much as those who have no claim to Christian faith. When we say that God prohibits the taking of innocent life people often respond by asking why they should listen to us if we ourselves do it.

The next thing David did was try to reason with Saul: "**David said to Saul, 'Why do you listen to the words of men, saying, "Behold, David seeks to harm you"?'"**" (1 Samuel 24:9). We appeal to the heart through the mind. Education alone can never be enough. Unbelief is not just a lack of information, it is a sin--the unpardonable sin, in fact. But there is no path directly to the heart, so we appeal to the heart through the intellect.

When a group of us set up the Rockland Pregnancy Counseling Center in West Nyack, New York, in the late 1980's we immediately put certain things in the counseling room. We had beautiful pictures of babies, videotapes of babies in the womb, and a row of fetal models starting just after conception and ending just before birth. Women who came for advice were first seated in that nicely-decorated room equipped with crucial information about the matter for which they had come. And as pregnancy center ministry is sometimes conducted today, showing the mother the baby in the womb with a sonogram makes about eighty percent of them change their minds about abortion. We appeal to the conscience through the mind.

David then did what may have been the most important thing of all in seeking to awaken Saul's conscience. He honored God, as the text goes on to reveal: "**Behold, this day your eyes have seen that the LORD had given you today into my hand in the cave, and some said to kill you, but my eye had pity on you; and I said, 'I will not stretch out my hand against my lord, for he is the LORD'S anointed'"** (1 Samuel 24:10). David's words revealed that he had refused to use a tempting opportunity to fix his personal problems because of his desire to honor God. The testimonies of women who either kept their babies or had them placed with adoptive parents have the same kind of impact. Our personal testimony changes our words from the abstract to the concrete and personal. It becomes the proof of our desire to honor the Lord, and displays the worthiness of our God for all to see.

There is an iceberg of unspoken assumptions in what David said. His conscience could not have worked in this way if he did not know how to honor God. And the only way to know that is to know what God requires of us. There is such a thing as general revelation, where God reveals general truths to mankind about his laws, but it is very limited. We look to special revelation, the Bible, to train our minds with the knowledge of God. Without that knowledge, the conscience cannot work in a healthy way. It will have huge gaps and utter mistakes. It will fail to trigger when we are doing something genuinely wrong, and it will trigger randomly, for example, when dad harmlessly blows some smoke for a science experiment.

This is one of our most important jobs in raising a generation of God-fearing people. Both the home and the church are choice opportunities to put the truth of God into the minds of the young so that the moment they are out from under our guidance they will have the equipment to do the right thing by their own choice. It is also a crucial role of all churches to persist at public Bible teaching so that the church and people at large will not be deprived of their opportunity to honor God. Whether they choose to do so is up to them, but we have a responsibility to give them their chance by teaching the truth.

We then see David making a two-pronged approach to deal with the issue of fear in Saul's life, as the story continues: "**Now, my father, see! Indeed, see the edge of your robe in my hand! For in that I cut off the edge of your robe and did not kill you, know and perceive that there is no evil or rebellion in my hands, and I have not sinned against you, though you are lying in wait for my life to take it. May the LORD judge between you and me, and may the LORD avenge me on you; but**

my hand shall not be against you. As the proverb of the ancients says, 'Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness'; but my hand shall not be against you. After whom has the king of Israel come out? Whom are you pursuing? A dead dog, a single flea?'" (1 Samuel 24:11-14). David's first prong was this rare opportunity to prove to Saul that he had nothing to fear from him. These will not often come, but we must be alert to the opportunity. For example, politics has often involved Christians in demonizing opponents. But then the demonized people naturally fear us: *If they have that much anger we must always be on our guard against them trying to hurt us!*

This is a most major distraction from the second prong of David's argument which was to seek to raise Saul's fear of the Lord. If people are focused on fearing us, they will be diverted from thinking about their need to fear a holy God who always punishes the wicked. David stretched the limits of rhetoric in his appeal for Saul to consider him nothing to be concerned about and the Lord to be worthy of fear. No conscience can be healthy without at least a minimal fear of the Lord.

Finally, David openly committed the outcome of this confrontation to the Lord in Saul's hearing, as verse 15 reveals: **"The LORD therefore be judge and decide between you and me; and may He see and plead my cause and deliver me from your hand"** (1 Samuel 24:15). Do we, as Christians, trust the Lord to provide when we have "inconvenient" babies? Do we trust him with our reputations, our finances, our health, and our futures? People know whether we do or not, and if we do not, they will not be likely to do so either.

The outcome of David's appeal was that Saul's conscience was gloriously reawakened! He wept out loud, he admitted that he had been wrong in seeking David's life, he was chastened by David's self-restraint, and he remembered the Lord. Furthermore, he admitted in the hearing of many that the Lord would establish David as king after him. If we could only get the conscience of America to wake up in the same way over abortion—and many other things!

We have seen that attempts to legislate abortion away have only had slight success. Here is the inescapable logic: No definitive legislative change will come without the reawakening of the American conscience; the conscience cannot be reawakened without a return to belief in moral absolutes; belief in moral absolutes will not come without a return to belief in a holy, omnipotent God; and belief in the true God will not come without a massive revival on a national scale. What part will you play in a national revival? It is an act of God. Not even a national disaster can cause it. My church in Rochester, New York, had only one Sunday of increased attendance after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 which killed about 3,000 people--the worst attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor!

I urge you to do the things necessary to keep your own conscience trained and active. Hide the word of God in your heart so that you can speak it into the doings of daily life. Embrace the risk of faith to trust God with your future well-being without reservation. And use your opportunities, as David did, to awaken the consciences of others whenever you can.

If your own conscience is bothering you today, confess your sin to the Lord and receive his unconditional forgiveness, cleansing, and healing for your soul. Then make any necessary acts of confession and restitution. Your concrete actions may add together with that of many others to bring the change we need in our nation. And pray like mad that people's consciences will come to scream once again at the wrongs with which we have become so comfortable.