
A Good Conscience Before God (Acts 23:1-11)
7/9/2017 Sermon by Pastor Jason Liebenow



How long will you live? I recently saw a study that said the average lifespan of Americans is 79 years. That's a pretty long time. A lot you can do in 79 years. I feel I've already done a lot and I'm not 30 yet!

Now, let me ask you this: how long will you live? Jesus has opened eternal life in heaven for us. How long is that? 20 years? 100? 1000? 1,000,000,000 years? It's hard to imagine. Our earthly lives are about as long as a period on your bulletin. But our lives in heaven will be longer than the farthest sight your eyes can see.

Could there possibly be anything more important in this short life than making sure we will spend eternity in the right place? Could there be anything more important than repenting of our sins and turning to Jesus in faith? Could there be anything more important than keeping a clear conscience? As we take this Sunday to look at the persecution of Christians, we read about a man who had a good conscience toward God: the Apostle Paul.

Paul was someone who knew all about the persecution of Christians. Paul had persecuted the Church himself. He described himself as obsessed with pursuing all who followed Christ. He believed there was only one remedy for Christians, to hunt them down, throw them in prison, and put them to death. Does that sound like someone who can have a good conscience? A blasphemer? A persecutor? A violent man? God would have to work a miracle for someone like that to have a good conscience. And he did exactly that.

God appeared to Paul and confronted him with his sins. God showed Paul that he was walking the path to hell, that he was fighting against his very God and master. And in that moment, in the terror of all Paul had been working toward, in the realization that he was headed straight for hell, God worked faith in Paul's heart; faith to believe that all of Paul's sins had been forgiven in Christ; faith to believe that Jesus, whom he had persecuted, had earned heaven for Paul.

That made his conscience good toward God. Not that Paul strove to live a perfect life because God had put him on the right track. Not that Paul really knew his issues and dug deep to fix his life. Paul had a good conscience only because God had

washed away Paul's sins.

When I put on one of my suits, I don't need to wash it. It's already clean. Yeah, I try to stay away from mud because I want to keep it clean, but when it eventually does get dirty, I take off the suit, take it to the dry-cleaners, and I get it back nice and clean.

That's how Paul got his good conscience. And that's how you and I do as well. We don't need to wash our consciences clean just like I don't wash my suit while I'm wearing it. Instead, we give our consciences to God and he washes them clean for us, in the blood of Christ. Now, of course, with clean consciences, we want to keep them clean. We do want to avoid sin in our lives. But when sin eventually does stain our consciences again, we take them off and send them to the cleaners. We send them back to Jesus, so that he can again wash us clean.

God had washed Paul clean and given him a good conscience. So Paul strove to keep that nice suit clean. It's here that we see Paul come before the high priest named Ananias.

Let me paint you a picture of Ananias for a second. The man was a leader of God's people. He served in God's very temple. But he had a reputation for being violent. This passage where Ananias commands Paul to be struck was typical of his leadership. What's more, I even read reports about Ananias stealing temple offerings to line his own pockets! This was a corrupt man who absolutely did not deserve his position of leadership. When Ananias commands Paul be struck, Paul is outraged at the hypocrisy and he points it out in no uncertain terms! Paul knew that God will punish all such behavior and he made that clear to everyone.

But notice, after someone points out to Paul that this is the high priest, what does Paul do? Even though Paul was confronting an evil man, a hypocritical and corrupt leader of his own people, Paul noticed a stain of sin splotching onto his nice clean conscience, the one God had given him. Even though Paul may have been in the right to speak against this man, Paul also knew that God had set this man up as his ruler. Paul knew that it was his God-given duty to respect this leader. Paul wanted to keep his good conscience clean. So he backed off. He apologized. He admitted his wrong and even condemned himself with his quotation of Scripture. Paul was sending his conscience back to the cleaners.

Let me ask you all, how do you speak about your leaders? How do you speak about your presidents? How do you speak about Trump? How did you speak about Obama? How do you speak about your boss? How do you speak about your pastors? How do you speak about your parents? God has given us a clean conscience. When we speak evil against our leaders, we are taking our clean cloths into the mud.

Or how do you speak about hypocrites? How do you talk to people you know to be in the wrong? Do you speak to them in love and in genuine concern for their own spiritual welfare? Or do you only seek to stroke your own ego? Do you speak in order to build yourself up by tearing someone else down? When we selfishly lash out in anger for what someone else has done wrong, we are dragging our clean consciences through the mud.

May we follow Paul's example by taking off our disgusting consciences and giving them to Christ. Let's take ourselves to the One who can clean us. Jesus will again wash us clean. It's so easy to see someone else's wrong and to dwell on that. But their wrongs cannot mess up our good conscience. We can do that when we lash out at others. We can do that when, as Jesus says, we go on and on about the speck in our brother's eye but pay no attention to the plank in our own. Disrespecting authority and judging others, even when they deserve it, only serves to make *us* the real hypocrites. Take off that suit, and send it to the cleaners. Repent, and turn to Jesus for a good conscience.

Do notice how Paul was able to maintain his good conscience. He quoted Scripture. Paul was regularly in God's Word. Paul even memorized passages. What better way to keep washing our souls, than by hearing the cleaner, Jesus Christ speak to us? Get into the Word. Memorize the Word so that you have it even when you don't have a Bible!

That's how Paul strove to keep his conscience clean. It happened because God washed away his sins. It happened because, as he grew in God's Word, God continued to wash his conscience clean and make it good. It did not happen because Paul worked so hard at being good. Paul simply gave himself to God and let God do all the work. As God worked on Paul through his Word, Paul wanted more and more to keep that conscience clean. Paul wanted more and more to live for heaven,

rather than to live for life on earth. Paul grew in that over time as he stayed in God's Word.

As Paul continued to grow in God's Word, he learned even more about the persecution of Christians. After all he knew about dishing it out, now he learned how to take it. In Acts 23, Paul finds himself on trial specifically because of his hope in the resurrection; Jesus' resurrection from the dead, which had cleaned his conscience, which had dressed him in a conscience so fine that it was fit for heaven.

Paul's clear conscience had led him to earthly suffering. His hope led him to stand before a riotous mob that nearly tore him to pieces. That had to be horrifying for Paul. But as he sat in prison that night, God, the one who had washed him and made him clean, Jesus Christ came and stood right by Paul to encourage him. Jesus came to remind Paul that this life and his sufferings here were merely a breath. They would only be as long as the period on a page. Paul had a much longer eternity in heaven waiting for him.

Dear friends, let us follow Paul's example by seeking our good conscience before God through trusting in God's gift to us rather than through our efforts, by striving to keep clean our consciences which have already been made good by God, and by looking to God for courage as we suffer in this life. The sufferings will not last, but heaven will. Amen.