

The Counseling Zone: A View from the Counselor's Chair

by Pastor Blake Shaw

One of the joys of serving in our counseling ministry here at Grace is the opportunity that we have to impact our community with the glorious gospel of Christ. Recently, our Counseling Committee had a Visionary Planning Meeting in which we set down some long range plans/goals. One main goal we have is to develop our counseling ministry to the point where we can actually offer free counseling to our community so that we could take the hope of the gospel and life-changing truths of God's glorious Word to people in search of answers to their problems. Understandably, such a ministry will bring people into our church family — which is good.

In the aftermath of our meeting and a subsequent meeting with our whole counseling team, I was pondering a very significant issue that often is talked about by pastors, leaders, and other members of many churches. That issue is the condition of the church and what we as followers of Christ can do to draw more people into our church fellowship. There is nothing wrong with wanting more people to be a part of your church fellowship. Many specialists of our day provide conferences/seminars, books, and DVD's explaining how to draw people into a church. Martyn Lloyd Jones addresses this issue in his book *Setting Our Affections on Glory*. In order to provoke some thought about this issue, I provide this extensive quote from Jones:

Now I know there are many who, looking at the state of the church today, feel that the one thing for us to do is immediately to consider what methods we can employ in order to win outsiders. That is a perfectly right and good thing to think about. But they start with that. They say, 'Here we are, and there are the people outside who are indifferent to the church,' and immediately they begin to consider means and methods of interesting and attracting outsiders. And some of them seem to be prepared to go to almost any lengths and to borrow any measures conceivable from the world itself in order to do something to get hold of these people. Now while I am in entire agreement with evangelism and would be among the first to say that the primary task of the Christian church is evangelism, I do, nevertheless, suggest that when we start immediately to think of the methods, of what we can do, to attract those who are outside, we are starting at the wrong point. I suggest rather that the first question we should ask is, why are those people outside? And I have already given my own answer to that question. Indeed, it is the answer, they themselves give. They are outside very largely because of what they see in us who are inside. So I suggest that the first question that ought to be engaging us is this: What is wrong with us? What can we do about ourselves in order that we may attract the world outside instead of repelling it? Surely this is the first step. Instead of assuming that all is more or less all right with us and consider means and methods of winning outsiders, we should be concerned about dealing with whatever it is in us, that is repelling them. We must bring ourselves into such a condition

that we become an attraction and create with them the desire to be among us and to share the things we enjoy. That is why all this is so important to us. For some reason or other we seem to be giving the impression to the world outside that one of the main effects of becoming a Christian is to make one miserable and to create problems and difficulties.

Let me put it to you in a very simple picture. Look at the people who want to attend some game or other on a Saturday afternoon. Watch them as they prepare to go to that event. They keep their eye on the clock. They are anxious to be there on time, in fact before anything starts. And watch them as they go there. They are all rushing. They want to see everything from beginning to end. So they hurry along with great enthusiasm. Then watch them shouting and see them smiling. You see them almost in a state of ecstasy. They are almost beyond themselves, they are so enjoying it and are so thrilled by it all. And when the game finishes watch them as they go home. They are all talking with animation, one commenting on this and the other on that. They are smiling. They seem to have had a marvelous time, and it has occupied them for hours. That is the picture, is it not, of the world indulging in its pleasures and in the things in which it believes?

Now take a look at Christian people, church members. Sunday morning arrives. What is the picture? Well, they are rather doubtful about whether or not they really will get up to go to church. After all, they lead busy lives, and a man must have some rest sometime! They did not say that on Saturday, but this is how they feel on Sunday morning. Going to church really is a bit of a burden, and their hearts are not in it. But in the end they decide they will go. After all, it is a matter of duty. So they get up. Are they anxious to be at church before anything starts and do they want to make sure they get the best seats so they won't miss anything? You know the answer! The people on Saturday afternoon had only one complaint, and that was that the game came to an end too quickly. Is it like that with Christian people when they come to church on Sunday? Do they complain that the service ends too quickly? And what is the congregation like during the service? Are they moved with enthusiasm? Are they alive and alert and watching and waiting and listening? And how do they sing and join in? Is it similar to what happened on Saturday afternoon? Then watch them as they go home. Do they give the impression that they have been doing something wonderful and amazing? That they have had the richest and the highest experience that it is ever possible to have in this world? Are they talking with enthusiasm to one another about some aspect of the glory of the gospel or something was made clear in the preaching of the Word?

Thought provoked? What say you?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: The Community of Grace Biblical Counseling Ministry and the editor of the monthly newsletter welcome letters from the readers. Letters may be edited if the editorial team deems it necessary to do so to fit the space allowed or due to unbiblical communication practices. We encourage the reader to write with edification in mind. Letters must be signed. Names can be withheld upon request. If you have a question about counseling that you would like to ask in future publications - feel free to submit those questions to Pastor Blake Shaw.

THE COG

Community Of Grace Biblical Counseling Ministry
Edition #34 — February 2016



Food for Thought BY PASTOR BLAKE SHAW

Conscience Check

“The Conscience! What a precious gift, given by our Creator to everyone who draws breath. That’s been the topic of our Food for Thought column over the last half a year or so. What we have seen thus far is a definition of the conscience, how the conscience works, why we have a conscience, how the world has worked to silence the conscience, and why an understanding of the depths of sin is so critical to understand the role of the conscience.

Coming off of our previous articles, there is yet one concern I have. I am concerned that it might be easy for us to read about the individuals featured in previous articles (who happen to be deeply entrenched in the grossest of sins—sins that most of us would abhor) and process their situations more as judges than as fellow sinners, who are also in desperate need of a Savior. In the last edition we read about John, the man who trashed his family, his reputation, his (supposed) relationship with Christ, the church, and community. He hardened his conscience and left it all for another woman. Whenever we hear of such an incident, we grieve, yet we also know that we could take the same path. Such realization keeps us in a posture of humility. For this article though, let’s look at something that perhaps will make many of us in the church uncomfortable. You see, when speaking of the hardened conscience, it might be a mistake for us to too easily gloss over the previous examples because perhaps we aren’t destroying our family and reputation by committing adultery, imbibing in alcohol to the point of intoxication, or stealing funds from the accounts at work. And because of that, we may assume that a hardened conscience isn’t an issue with us. So let me press on the issue.

The Battle

Perhaps your fleshly battle is something like gossip, or laziness, or making excuses, or selfishness, or subtle anger, or quiet anger that has bled over into a lingering bitterness towards another, or jealousy, or having a critical and judgmental spirit. Perhaps your fleshly battle in one of these areas has been going on for so long that you simply see it as a part of who you are. You have lived with it for so long that it no longer seems to be wrong. When others speak of how badly they feel because of their struggle with the same sin, you find yourself thinking, “Man, they are just too sensitive. That’s not that big of a deal. My goodness, I know a lot of Christians who do that.” That’s a time to take note.

Marsha

Marsha and Larry are perfect examples of what I am writing about. Marsha would tell you that she grew up in a house where all social interaction seemed to be focused on the latest news about people throughout the community.

That was the culture in which she was raised. She was trained in gossip. She’d tell you that she got so used to gossiping that it was an oddity to her when she became a believer to learn that gossip didn’t please the Lord. And so, for several years, Marsha worked hard to break the habit of gossip. When she and her family moved to a new location, she found herself surrounded at the work-place by several women who loved to gossip. At first she tried to not join in. Eventually, she’d find herself offering little comments. Her conscience would tell her to not join the conversation. Early on she would take heed to the conscience and exit the conversation. Months passed and little-by-little Marsha found herself giving more time to the gossip sessions that flooded the break room. Every day, after lunch was spent gossiping, Marsha would find herself weighed down with guilt because she knew that what she had done didn’t please the Lord. Over time, Marsha began to justify the gossip. It felt good to “vent” her frustrations about her husband with a co-worker, the boss, or customers who came and went throughout the day. And slowly, Marsha silenced her conscience. Today, she lives as a lonely, bitter woman, with very few friends.

Larry

Larry is a well-studied man. He is always reading and studying books. He knows his doctrine. He actually knows his Bible very well. Those who know him say that Larry is a brilliant man. He claims to have the gift of discernment and so he is quick to discern when something is doctrinally amiss in the life of the church. If there was a doctrinal police-officer to be hired, he would be a prime candidate. But Larry isn’t just well studied and very discerning. In fact, he is one of those men who has seen it as his calling in life to confront all wrongs and make things right. And he is abrasive. People dodge him when they see him from a distance. Those who used to associate with him have backed off from a close association, opting to keep him at arm’s length. Larry noticed his former friends backing away. He notices that people avoid him. A loving friend had even told him that he is argumentative, harsh, and lacks grace when he confronts people or addresses a theological issue. Larry has practiced this for so long that he says, “That’s just who I am. God made me this way.”

But Larry actually has simply silenced his conscience for he hasn’t always been this way. Early on as a believer he was teachable, humble, and pleasant to be around. He wanted to understand doctrine, the Scriptures, and how to live in a way that would please the Lord. He asked questions, read books, listened to sermons, met with pastors, and devoured anything that would help him understand God’s Word.

Continued on next page—

Food for Thought [Continued from cover page]

Several years after becoming a believer he married Marsha who was from a family who specialized in defending the faith. Larry thrived in the relationship because he could learn so much from his in-laws. Subtly Larry was being puffed up. You see, love and gentleness were disjointed from the knowledge that he was gaining. Larry was always on the lookout for anything that would be considered wrong doctrine. When he saw it, he would pounce on that person to correct him. At first Larry would have times where he felt bad about how he treated the person but given time, Larry began to reason that, "...this generation has just lost its way and its ability to discern. Biblical illiteracy is a huge problem and so, if I don't correct them, who will." Larry is now arrogant, divisive, and with very few friends.

Take any of the sin issues listed above and consider how one may harden his or her conscience in any of those areas. Given enough time and enough practice, as well as silencing the conscience when it tells a person to stop, to not continue, and the conscience can be silenced.

What I find fascinating about the conscience is how we as humans take this precious gift from our Creator and we do one of two things to it: 1) We can treat it much like Hymenaeus and Alexander did (I Timothy 1:18-20), rejecting both faith and a good conscience and subsequently become an apostate, or, 2) We could have a conscience that would be like the Apostle Paul's conscience. People may not know this but when defending himself against the many accusations that were tossed at Paul and in an attempt to destroy his ministry, Paul actually made his last and final appeal to his conscience. We see this in the pages of 2 Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians 1:12, Paul says, "For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you." In the midst of being falsely accused of being proud, self-serving, untrustworthy, incompetent, etc., Paul simply appealed to the highest human court, the conscience.

John MacArthur, in the footnotes of his study Bible, writes, *Conscience: The soul's warning system, which allows human beings to contemplate their motives and actions and make moral evaluations of what is right and wrong...In order to work as God designed it, the conscience must be informed to the highest moral and spiritual level and best standard, which means submitting it to the Holy Spirit through God's Word (cf. Rom. 12:1, 2; I Tim. 1:19; 2 Tim. 2:15; Heb. 9:14; 10:22). Paul's fully enlightened conscience exonerated him completely (Acts 23:1; 24:16; I Tim. 1:5; 3:9; 2 Tim. 1:3).*

When all else failed, it seems that Paul's highest and greatest defense was to point out that his testimony is that his conscience tells him that he conducted himself in a godly way. Paul had to live with himself, so he worked hard to maintain a softened conscience. Paul knew that to live contrary to what he preached and taught was a hypocrisy that would disqualify him from ministry. That is one reason why he was so disciplined with his body (I Corinthians 9:24-27).

The Challenge

Let's not miss a great challenge to our hearts in this. Can we appeal to our conscience? Can we, with a clear conscience, say that we have dealt with sin and temptations to sin in a way that would keep the conscience softened and working in the fashion in which the Creator has given it? Can we say with bold confidence that we have conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God? Go back to the start of this article and read through the third paragraph and ask yourself, "Are there areas of my life that are sinful but tend to be more subtle and not noticeable to those around me? Am I slowly hardening my conscience?" I believe that our Lord wants us to live with a clear and clean conscience. Sometimes it is really good for us to stop and give this area of our life a look-over. Will you take the time to do just that today?

In address this problematic idea about feelings let's look at what the Bible teaches. We are going to examine two areas of theology: Theology proper and anthropology.

Theology proper is the study of the nature, character, and attributes of the Godhead. This area of study examines and explains, as best our finite minds can, the person of God. Scripture affirms that all three members of the Godhead (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit) have and display feelings/emotions.

God is a God Who Feels

We see the emotions of God displayed throughout Scripture. A cursory glance reveals the extent to which God is an emotional being. He demonstrates emotions such as grief (Genesis 6:5-6; Psalm 78:40-41; Ezekiel 6:9), pleasure (Matthew 3:17, 17:5; Ephesians 1:5), love (Jeremiah 31:3; John 3:16; Romans 5:5, 8), delight (Isaiah 42:1), rejoicing (Isaiah 62:5, 65:19; Zephaniah 3:17), hatred (Psalm 5:5-6; Proverbs 6:16-19; Malachi 2:16), anger (Exodus 22:22-24; Psalm 7:11; Jeremiah 10:10), and compassion (Exodus 33:19; Psalm 78:38, 103:13; Isaiah 49:15-16; II Corinthians 1:3-5).

Continued on facing page—

Q&A Continued from facing page

God the Son, as deity, possesses all the emotions of the Godhead. He displayed a full range of emotions while living on earth. Humanly speaking, He displayed these emotions perfectly, without sin. He had compassion upon hurting people (Matthew 14:14; Mark 6:34). He loved (John 3:16; 11:5, 36). He marveled at the faith of the centurion (Matthew 8:10), and He was righteously angered at the misuse of God's temple (Matthew 21:12-13; John 2:17). Jesus displayed numerous emotions recorded in John chapter 11: in addition to love (11:5, 36), He groaned with indignant anger (11:33, 38), and He wept with sorrow (11:35). Jesus' soul was deeply troubled the night before His death (Matthew 26:38; John 12:27, 13:21), and as our Great High Priest He sympathizes with us (Hebrews 4:15).

God the Spirit, as a member of the Godhead, shares the same emotional nature with God the Father and God the Son. Scripture specifically indicates that the indwelling Spirit grieves when a believer chooses to walk in sin (Ephesians 4:30).

God is a God who feels. Emotions are a significant aspect of His being, permeating His entire nature, character, and attributes. The fact that God is an emotional God, and that He is wholly righteous, demonstrates to us that feelings are not inherently sinful.

God Created Man as an Emotional Being

Now, let's look at biblical anthropology, which is the study of mankind, to see if feelings are inherently sinful. The Bible records that mankind was created as an emotional being in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). The Hebrew word for "image" in Genesis chapter one is tselem ("tseh'-lem") meaning likeness, resemblance, or a representative figure. Tselem does not refer to an exact duplicate, but it represents the likeness of the original.

There are several ways in which man is like God, including our ability to think and reason, the ability to create, and our nature as relational, volitional, and emotional beings. That fact that man is an emotional being allows him to relate to his Creator and also to imitate Him. That is, man's own emotions help him to more fully understand the person of God and, in turn, be like Him by displaying unblemished Godlike emotion.

When man was created as an emotional being, he had no sin, fault, or defect. After God created man, He saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good (Genesis 1:31a). Feelings and emotions are included in the "everything" that God pronounced "good." Brian Borgman, in his superb message on emotions, says that emotions were "originally designed by God as an inherently good part of us." Emotions are a beneficial and important aspect of our created being so they cannot be inherently wrong or sinful. Neither do feelings originate from a corrupt source; their origin is the creative handiwork of God. He created mankind as emotional beings according to His own image.

Feelings are not the Enemy: Sin is

The second problem with believing feelings are inherently wrong is that it labels feelings as our enemy rather than sin, our true enemy. Sometimes we think that our focus, as believers, is to fight our feelings and just do the "right thing." Sam Williams, in his excellent article on emotions, calls this idea a contemporary fallacy that results in "falsely dichotomizing emotions and obedience." I agree that sometimes we get confused and think that our battle is against our feelings instead of our sin. When we believe this it can make our spiritual battle ineffective. Our sanctification can be steered off-course if we focus each day on fighting feelings rather than fighting sin.

I know a sister in Christ who was confused regarding what the Bible teaches about feelings. She daily "ignored" her feelings and just "did the right thing." She told me that she "mechanically obeyed," thinking her dutiful obedience was the way to "live for God's glory." One day she asked me in desperation, "How long does it take to keep obeying before I change?" She believed that if she just kept doing the right thing that she would eventually develop the right feelings and she would become more Christlike. This sister had finally grown tired of her routine acts of "obedience" and was exasperated by her lack of love for Jesus. She told me, "I want to obey God because I love Him, not just out of duty!"

This dear sister's sanctification process had been sidetracked by the false dichotomy by which she was living. She finally came to the correct understanding that the aim of sanctification is not fighting feelings. The aim of sanctification is fighting sin (sinful thoughts, sinful desires, and sinful feelings) so that we can walk in Christlike righteousness (with righteous thoughts, righteous desires, and righteous feelings), which is what truly brings God glory. For her, the missing key was learning to identify and confess the sin in her heart such as pride, anger, and selfishness (I John 1:9). Daily "ignoring her feelings" actually kept her from accurately diagnosing the sin in her heart. She now has a correct understanding of sanctification and is on the right track for true heart change.

Thankfully, we don't have to choose between obeying God's Word or our feelings. Sin is the real enemy we battle. The problem is not that feelings are inherently wrong, always leading us astray. The problem is that sin is inherently wrong and will always, yes, always lead us astray. The dichotomy presented in Scripture is "sin versus righteousness" and not "feelings versus righteousness." Feelings in and of themselves are not inherently wrong. In fact, feelings can be sanctified. We will explore this biblical principle in the next edition of The COG.

1 Baker, Warren, ed., The Complete Word Study Old Testament, (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1994) 2328.

Grudem, Wayne, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine, (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994) 445-449.

Borgman, Brian, "Biblical Foundations (Part 2)" <<http://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=260416282>> 25 Jun, 2013.

Williams, Sam, "Toward a Theology of Emotion" <<http://biblicalcounselingcoalition.org/resources/toward-a-theology-of-emotion>> 29 Jun, 2013.

Q&A with Guest Writer: Julie Gossack

Sometimes conservative Evangelicals avoid the topic of feelings and emotions and even go so far as to portray them as a bad thing. Could you address the issue of feelings and what role they play in our lives?

This is Part 3 of a 6-part series to answer this question. So far we have defined feelings and discussed the first of four biblical principles of feelings: 1) feelings are a component of the heart from which we live, 2) feelings are not inherently wrong, 3) feelings can be sanctified, and 4) feelings must be directed by God's Word. In this edition of The COG, we will consider the second of these four principles.

Principle 2: Feelings are not inherently wrong.

Sometimes people have the idea that feelings are inherently wrong and originate from a corrupt source. There are a couple problems with this idea. The first problem is that Scripture doesn't teach that feelings are inherently wrong. The second problem is that this idea labels feelings as our enemy rather than sin, our true enemy.