

## PAUL - "Listening To The Still Small Voice Of Conscience"



1. **(Overall)** It is important to distinguish between regret and guilt as we begin this chapter. Guilt has to do with conscience, but regret has to do with memory. God can cleanse a guilty conscience, but He can not erase regret. Not knowing this difference produces some very unfortunate results:
  - a. Because memory is persistent, what I assume to be *guilt* feelings may very well be momentary regret. God is the source of forgiveness, *not* me.
  - b. I might have unrealistic expectations for forgiveness, presuming my past will never "bother me" or revisit me or discourage me, once I'm forgiven.

We see this issue of regret express itself repeatedly in the writings of Paul, indicating that there were some things that he never really "got over" from his past:

**(21 years later)** *"Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me."* **1 Corinthians 15:8-10**

**(22 years later)** *"I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing."* **2 Corinthians 12:11**

**(27 years later)** *"Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,"* **Ephesians 3:7, 8**

**(30 years later)** *"I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."* **1 Timothy 1:12-14**

It may very well have been Paul's lingering regret in the face of grace that became his motivation to "finish the race."

2. **(Q1-Acts 8)** The verbs in this passage ("ravaging," "entering," "dragging" and "committed") *all* reflect an on-going activity. Saul was fully engaged in these activities. Also, the verb translated "ravaged" (ESV) is used only once in the New Testament. It's a *very* hostile verb. It is translated "destroy" in Ps 80:13 of the Greek Old Testament in relation to a pig in a vineyard.

This passage *must* be "unpacked" slowly as we study it. Luke is very careful to tell us that *both* men and women were dragged off to prison by Saul. Also, with violent verbs on both sides of the "entering," we must conclude that Saul was "breaking and entering," or "entering by force." Imagine what Saul *saw and heard*, not just what he did. Perhaps he saw and heard children crying and screaming as their parents were "dragged off" right in front of their eyes. Perhaps an occasional father was beaten right in front of his family for resisting the Temple guard's arrest. Saul disrupted synagogues to expose these "new Jews," and tried to force them to blaspheme so they could "justly" be condemned under Jewish law (Acts 27:9-11). Blasphemy was a capital offense. Saul was doing to them the same thing Caiphas had done to Jesus.

And, above *all* of this, we must be careful to remind ourselves that these were all Jews, not Gentiles. These were Saul's fellow "brothers and sisters" in the faith!

3. **(Q1-Acts 22)** This is a very insightful passage because in it we see that at the beginning, “followers of the Way” (cf. Acts 9:2) and Jews were attending the synagogue together. These new believers had no identity of their own apart from their heritage as Jews. Their scriptures were Jewish, their messiah was Jewish, their friends and families were all Jewish. We need to understand that these were very confusing times for everyone, not just Saul.
4. **(Q2)** The Greek verb here for “kick” is in the present tense, indicating that Saul was repeatedly doing this. It was *not* something he had done once or twice.
5. **(Q6-Titus 1:15)** The Greek word translated “defiled” (*mianō*) can mean to stain or dye with another color. In the context of this verse, these people are not only “stained,” but unable to recognize or value the *absence* of “stains” (i.e., purity).
6. **(Q6-1 Tim 4)** The verb for “seared” is the word from which we get our English word, “cauterize.” The image of “branding with a hot iron” is in view here. The question is whether the “branding” has rendered the conscience less sensitive (like scar tissue) or if it means a permanent mark is upon the conscience from sin. The context seems to favor the first idea, because it speaks of deliberate lying and hypocrisy. This verse appears to be describing a conscience that no longer “feels” anything.
7. **(Q9)** We make a serious error when we do not take into account that neglecting our conscience over time causes the “zero” zone of our discernment of good and evil to be “reset.” The place where I failed to heed my conscience becomes the new “zero” point. The less I listen to my conscience, the less it speaks. And, the *more* I listen to my conscience, the less it speaks. That means that a “silent” conscience proves nothing. In fact, a “silent” conscience might be a sign of pathology, not health.
8. **(Q10)** It is very important to understand that by the time 1 Timothy was written, Paul had been shipwrecked *at least four times*. He tells us in 2 Corinthians 11:25 that he had already been shipwrecked three times by the time he wrote that letter. And, 2 Corinthians was written about five years *before* Paul’s shipwreck in Acts 27! This metaphor in 1 Timothy was very carefully chosen by someone who had a vivid memory of the devastation and horror of shipwreck, *not* a good writer in search of the right figure of speech!



## “Stumbling Stones”

1. **(Q3)** The central issue here that mustn’t be lost is that *whatever* the issue—whether it was the persecution of fellow Jews, Saul’s own rejection of Jesus, or the deaths of innocent believers—the important point is that Saul was habitually bothered by something that originated with Jesus himself. In other words, the actual moral issue is *not* the focus of questions 3 & 4, but rather Saul’s apparent rationalization of his behavior. Eventually, Saul’s conscience won out, because he was a man of conscience (Acts 23:1).
2. **(Q6-1 Cor 8)** This type of conscience (i.e. “weak”) literally is a conscience lacking strength, *not* a conscience that possesses some pathology. The context is *very* clear that one believer is “beating with a stick” (Gk for “wound”) another believer by encouraging her to ignore her conscience; to do what she doesn’t have the strength to resist. This is especially important principle in the issue of “gray areas,” those behaviors that Christians disagree on. The point here is that I must *never* by behavior or argument try to “change someone’s mind” on issues of conscience, when the result would be the violation of their conscience. Especially in areas where they are weak in the first place.
3. **(Q8)** This question is contrasting spiritual maturity with spiritual infancy. This is *not* a discussion on behavior (i.e. “right and wrong”), but on discernment (i.e. “good and evil”). One person has to be taught because she *can not* discern on her own. The other can *discern* good from evil because they are familiar and

“skilled” with the “word of righteousness.” This “skill” has been developed through *using* the word as a lens through which to see and understand life.



## “Going Deeper”

1. **(Q6-Titus 1:15)** “Do you think there is a relationship between a defiled *mind* and a defiled *conscience*? If so, what?”
2. **(Q6)** “If the two passages in 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians are possibly describing two *opposite* types of consciences, what would they be?”
3. **(Q7)** “When is the last time listening to your conscience ‘cost’ you, socially? Financially? Professionally?”
4. **(Q8)** “Considering that *both* Christians and unbelievers have a conscience (cf. Rom 2:12-16), why are the truths in this question so vital in terms of how a healthy conscience is developed and protected?” **(NOTE:** *Some Christians think that simply having the Holy Spirit is the sufficient difference between believers and unbelievers. In other words, it’s God’s job, not mine, to develop a healthy and sensitive conscience! This is not only wrong in light of the Hebrews 5 passage, it’s the fast track to shipwreck of one’s faith.*)