

Psalm 51:10-12: *“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me! Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your Holy Spirit from me! Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit!”*

James Collins was sentenced to imprisonment in the Alabama penitentiary for his part in a bank robbery and murder. He escaped, settled in Quakertown, Pennsylvania, where by his hard work and honesty he became a respected citizen. His credit was so good, local merchants said, that he could walk in to any bank there and obtain \$5,000 only on his signature. Twenty years after his crime, married and widely respected, the law caught up with him, and he was identified. Before the officers took him back to the Alabama jail, he confessed: “I expected this for a long time. Never a day nor a night passed that I did not think I would be caught. You know we raise poultry, and every time one of the State Troopers stopped before the house I would wonder if he was coming to arrest me.”

Our text was written by a man who had a guilty conscience. It was not a bad conscience. It was a good conscience in the sense that it was a very useful one. David also had committed some high crimes. Moreover, if it had not been for his alert and active conscience, he would have plunged headlong in unbelief into hell. Instead, David is known as one of the great characters of the Bible. David’s guilty conscience was a most important possession. This is what we will examine today.

The Importance of possessing a Guilty Conscience

A guilty conscience is important because it gives the Christian –

1. A sense of guilt;
2. An understanding of sin;
3. A request for pardon; and
4. A desire for renewal.

1.

With a sense of desperate urgency David cries out in the text: “Create in me a clean heart, O God!” In Psalm 51 David repeatedly refers to “mine” iniquity, “my” transgressions, and “my” sin. He makes no attempt to evade the personal responsibility for his sin in order to diminish the terror in his conscience. David might have tried to do what we so often do. That is, he might have resorted to excuses. For instance, he might have focused the blame on other people or things, such as, on the circumstances which led to his sin, on his personality defects that influenced him to sin, or on the underprivileged social conditions as a poor shepherd that contributed to his temptation and fall. Yet David looked past all of these to the one overwhelming fact: “My sin is ever before me.”

In other words, these excuses did not alter the fact that it was his sin, and that he personally was held to be

responsible for it. It was his act, and his alone. His guilty conscience told him that.

To be sure, everyone has a conscience. God has promised that everyone will be conceived and born with one. Yet a conscience will differ from person to person. For instance, many people may have a guilty conscience which is not at all similar to the holy fear of God that was in David's heart. Some consciences simply may be afraid due to peer pressure. Other consciences may fear only the consequences of exposure, as the escaped convict of which we heard in the introduction.

Sometimes a conscience may be dulled through years of abuse. In other cases it may be very sensitive, but misdirected. Some of the most vicious acts in history such as the inquisitions and the burning of heretics prompted by the Roman Catholic authorities in the Middle Ages have been motivated by misguided consciences. In this connection, the Lord has prophesied: "The time comes that whoever would kill you will think that he does God a service."

There are also people who think that it would be wrong to marry, or wrong to eat pork.

Therefore, a conscience could become perverted. However it will be a useful instrument when it would be controlled by and directed by the will of God which is found in the Bible. Then a guilty conscience will be an important asset to the sinner, as it was to David, the writer of our text. David rightly was tormented by guilt

because he knew that he had sinned against his just and holy God.

2.

In addition, it could be said that a guilty conscience will be an important asset when it would act with a proper understanding of sin. For example, if your conscience would react only to certain sins, and you would hear its accusing voice only after you would commit serious sins, such as felonies, adultery, or blasphemy, your conscience will not be very good. To the contrary, David not only repented of his great sins, but also of his sinfulness. That is, David was horrified at the sinful nature which had produced his terrible sins of adultery and murder, and confessed: "I was shaped in iniquity." In other word, he declared that he had been formed inside of his mother in sinfulness. Therefore, David had a guilty conscience not only because he had done evil, but also because he was evil.

As a result you must learn from David that sin will not be simply a violation of a social code, or a lapse in one's own self-respect, for you stand in a perpetual relationship with God in all of your thoughts, words, and actions. As David admits to the Almighty: "Against you, and you only have I sinned" (Psalm 51:4).

In fact it is this feature that makes sin so frightening. Take the case of David! If his sin were merely a violation of the ethics of his day, then he would

have nothing to fear. After all, he was the king. He could do anything that he would wish. If his sin were simply a form of self-contradiction, a private matter between himself and his soul, he could have solved that problem by making a New Year's resolution. However, David rightly understood from Scripture that his sin meant a rift with God. Thus every sin endangered his spiritual relationship with God and, consequently, his spiritual life also. In light of this, David understood that sin could bring the greatest disaster that could come upon a person's soul. So he pleaded with God: "Do not cast me away from your presence!"

Have you ever thought of sin as this? That is to say, have you ever worried at the thought that God could and should cast you away from his presence; that your sin could put an end to your relationship with God? Do you sincerely plead: "Take not your Holy Spirit from me!" when you sing it in the Communion liturgy after the sermon? If you were not to plead it sincerely, then pray to God to give you a guilty conscience!

3.

So far you have seen that a guilty conscience will be important because it would give you a sense of guilt with an understanding of the sin which was committed. Just the same, if that were all that a guilty conscience could do, you could try to get rid of it somehow. For example, you could consider it as a "guilt complex," and try to stifle it. If your job would take your mind off of your conscience, you could work a lot. Yet your

conscience cannot be silenced by any human efforts. Only God's gospel power could do it.

Hence David followed the only way, the Bible's way, to quiet his conscience. Thus, on the one hand, David did not ask God to change or to adapt the Ten Commandments in order to get David excused. Nor did David ask God to change. David asked God to change David. That is, David prayed to God to create a clean heart within him.

Notice that David used the word "to create"! There was nothing in David with which God could begin. David was asking for a wonderful renewal which only God could effect.

This may seem to be rather presumptuous. That is, David was an adulterer and a murderer. How could he step before the holy and righteous Almighty and ask for sainthood?

The answer is that David knew the character of God. He knew his promises. If you would read the rest of Psalm 51 you will see that David was convinced of God's pledges that he was a God of "lovingkindness" and of "tender mercies." David understood the love of God through the coming Messiah, in which God would take on our flesh, dwell among us, assume our guilt, and suffer our punishment for our sins. As in the Old Testament's Levitical ceremony in which God would pronounce his people pure and declare them to be clean of their sins by divine announcement because a divinely

appointed animal had its life taken away after the people's sins were laid on it, so David knew that the suffering Messiah would take on our sins and suffer their punishment: death in hell, in order for the Almighty to declare us free from our sins' guilt and condemnation.

This is why a guilty conscience is important. A guilty conscience will be important since it would lead you to the cross of Christ for forgiveness. If your conscience would awaken in you a knowledge of your desperate need for forgiveness, convince you that you need a renewal in your life, and impel you to flee for mercy to the foot of Christ's cross, thank God for having a guilty conscience!

4.

In his saving faith David not only trusted that there is now no condemnation in Christ, but he also pleaded for a renewal. If his life would amount to anything, God in his mercy and might must give David the power to do so. David asked for a clean heart and for a willing spirit, that is to say, in the original Hebrew language, for a spirit that would be willing to obey God, and not to sin. Thus if your guilty conscience would make you wish for a better life, do not look within yourself! Look upward in faith to God, and pray: "Create in me a clean heart, O God!"

The subject of a guilty conscience may be a depressing one. Nevertheless, a guilty conscience will be connected to a Christian's happiness. In fact, the

ultimate purpose of a guilty conscience will be his spiritual happiness. David realized this. As a result, he pleaded: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation!" In other words, David asked: "By your power make me to know once again the spiritual joy and gladness which I currently have lost because of my sin, and which I do not feel!" Indeed, if a person would have sinned, it will be difficult to feel the joy of God's forgiveness afterward. Though you may be assured of God's forgiveness, the joy of it will be lacking since your thinking would have been going down the road of saddening sin, and your guilty conscience would have been depressing your emotions. It will take time for your thoughts and for your emotions to be turned around. Therefore, the repentant sinner will need the Lord to bring his power to bear on his depressed soul, and to bloom in his soul the joy that results from God's smiling forgiveness.

Yet sinners often will be tempted to think that they will have joy if only they would have more money, success, and popularity. As the king of Israel, David possessed all of these. Still he wrote this psalm. David had learned from Scripture that there could be no real joy without the forgiveness of sins from his Savior.

So learn this also! First of all, realize that a guilty conscience will be a blessing, for it will point you to the need for a Savior! Then, with your knowledge of the gospel, know that you could and should flee to your Redeemer to find peace from your conscience and joy for your soul!

Do so! Possess the joy of salvation!