

## A Clear Conscience Toward God and Man

Acts 24:10-27

By [Charles M. Wingard](#)

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Thank you, pastor, for the warm welcome, and thank you for having me here tonight to preach God's Word. You have such wonderful students preparing for ministry in your congregation. I know you are all enriched by their labors in your midst. Turn with me, please, to Acts, the twenty-fourth chapter. And I will begin reading at verse 10. This is a trial and everything that takes place to set this trial in motion begins in chapter 21. Paul has gone to Jerusalem to worship in the temple and to offer alms to the poor. There, while he is worshipping, Jews from Asia incite a mob to attack him. And, were it not for Lysias, a quick-thinking Roman tribune, Paul's life would've been taken there. He's placed under arrested by Lysias and when Lysias discovers that there is a plot to kill Paul, he removes him from Jerusalem to Caesarea, a Roman administrative city some sixty miles to the north. In Acts chapter 24, we see Paul appearing before the Roman governor, Felix. In the first nine verses Tertullus, in behalf of the prosecution, makes the case against. And then in verse 10 where I'll begin reading, Paul makes his defense before Felix. And right in the middle of that defense he says, "I take pains to have a clear conscience before God and man." He takes pains to have a clear conscience before God and man, and so should you and I. Before we read God's Word, let us pray.

*Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, we love you for your Word you've given to us. May we lay it up in our heart and love it, practice it in our lives by the power of your Holy Spirit. And so we ask you tonight to give us understanding for Jesus' sake, Amen.*

Hear God's Word:

And when the governor had nodded to him to speak, Paul replied:

"Knowing that for many years you have been a judge over this nation, I cheerfully make my defense. You can verify that it is not more than twelve days since I went up to worship in Jerusalem, and they did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a crowd, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city. Neither can they prove to you what they now bring up against me. But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing

everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. Now after several years I came to bring alms to my nation and to present offerings. While I was doing this, they found me purified in the temple, without any crowd or tumult. But some Jews from Asia—they ought to be here before you and to make an accusation, should they have anything against me. Or else let these men themselves say what wrongdoing they found when I stood before the council, other than this one thing that I cried out while standing among them: 'It is with respect to the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you this day.'"

But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way, put them off, saying, "When Lysias the tribune comes down, I will decide your case." Then he gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but have some liberty, and that none of his friends should be prevented from attending to his needs.

After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. And as he reasoned about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, "Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you." At the same time he hoped that money would be given him by Paul. So he sent for him often and conversed with him. When two years had elapsed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And desiring to do the Jews a favor, Felix left Paul in prison.

This is the Word of the Lord.

### **A Clear Conscience?**

Tonight, I want to ask you: What is the condition of your conscience? You may not have thought about that recently or perhaps ever. We've already prayed tonight for people who, in this congregation tonight, might not be converted. So I ask you again: what is the condition of your conscience? Paul tells us that it should always be before us, that we should always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. That was Paul's ambition and that should be yours too. What is the conscience and just how important is it? Well, the conscience is the God-given faculty that each of us possesses to distinguish right from wrong according to the law of God written on the heart. Now, the conscience delivers one up to verdicts. It either excuses actions or it accuses us. And how you listen to your conscience will determine your character of the course of your lifetime. If you choose holiness, your conscience excuses you. If

you choose sin, it accuses you. Heed your conscience over the course of a lifetime and you'll honor God and fellow man faithfully. Resist your conscience and you'll make a wreck of your life and you will produce ruin and heartache and pain and suffering in the lives of others. So, I ask again: what's the condition of your conscience today? Are you taking pains to have a clear conscience before God and man?

### **On Trial: Tertullus the Prosecutor and Paul the Defendant**

Now, let's go to the courtroom in Caesarea. The facts in this case are not in dispute. There was an incident at the temple. There had been a riot. A mob had threatened Paul. Paul is arrested by Lysias and now has been transferred to Caesarea. None of these facts are in dispute, but always in these kinds of cases how you interpret the facts, that's the issue that is before the court.

#### **Tertullus the Prosecutor**

There's the prosecutor in the courtroom. His name is Tertullus. He was probably a Gentile who was hired by the Jewish leaders that had come up from Jerusalem to prosecute Paul to make the case against him. And we can hear Tertullus saying, "Your Excellency, this man is a one man plague. He incites a riot. He belongs to a heretical sect and he had the audacity to bring the Gentile Prophemus into the very interior court of the temple. And, you know, your Honor that a man who does that is worthy of death."

#### **Paul the Defendant**

And then there's the defendant Paul. "Your Excellency, I come to worship and to give alms in Jerusalem. And The Way that I belong to, it's not a sect. But, we worship the God of our fathers and believe everything that is written in the law and the prophets. And, I like my accusers, have a hope in the resurrection. And, by the way, where are those Jews from Asia who stirred up the riot against me in Jerusalem? Where are they to bring their charges against me? No, your Honor, I take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man." Paul took those pains and so should you and I.

### **A Man Who Is Justified by Faith in Jesus Christ**

So this is a good place to pause and ask: What is a clear conscience? A clear conscience. First of all, a man who has a clear conscience is a man who is justified by faith in Jesus Christ. Without reconciliation to God by faith in Jesus Christ, without God's pronouncement of our justification, we cannot have a clear conscience. Clarence McCartney recalled the dream of Martin Luther as he dreamed that he stood before the judgment seat of God and there Satan was. And the books were opened and Satan read to Martin Luther incident after

incident after incident of sinful behavior. Luther sighed in despair. And then he said, "There is one entry that you have not made." And Satan asked, "What is it?" And he said, "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin." And it's the shed blood of Jesus Christ and Christ's imputed righteousness that are the foundation of a clear conscience before God. Our hymn writers get that right, don't they? "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness." "Jesus, thy blood and righteousness, my beauty are, my glorious dress. Fully absolved through these, I am, from sin and fear and guilt and shame. The terrors of the law and of God with me can have nothing to do. My Savior's obedience and his blood hide all my transgressions from view." Who's the man with clear conscience? He's the man that's been justified by faith in Jesus Christ.

### **A Man Who Fear God and the Coming Resurrection**

Who's the man with clear conscience? He's also the man who fears God, who fears the resurrection. He knows that one day he will stand in God's presence before his awesome tribunal and render an account for the life that he has lived. And he readies himself in his Savior for that great day.

### **A Man Who Obeys God**

Who is the man with the clear conscience? He is not only a man who is justified by faith, who fears God. He also obeys God. He looks upon his body as the temple of the Holy Spirit and seeks, by all the power the Holy Spirit gives, to abstain from any behavior that would defile that temple. What about those gray areas when we're not sure whether our course of action is right? Well, then, the proper thing to do is to be hesitant to commit any act that might offend God or our fellow man. Perhaps your mother was like my mother. When I would go to her and hold up a shirt and say, "Is this too dirty to wear?" What did she say? "If you have to ask, it is." We should have that attitude towards behavior that we're not quite sure about.

### **A Man Who Repents of Sin**

Who is the man with the clear conscience? He's justified by faith. He fears God. He obeys God. And he repents of sin. He repents of it just as quickly as he can. He grieves in his inner man that he's sinned against his blessed Savior and then he purposes to turn from that sin and walk in new obedience and he does it quickly. The man who fears God and would seek to have a clear conscience—when he speaks harshly to his wife, his conscience accuses him and then and there he agrees with God. He confesses his sin to her and to God. And he turns from it. When he's convicted that he's not been praying for his congregation, he repents of that and goes to the work of prayer. A young person who has spoken rashly, shared gossip about another—the Holy Spirit convicts, the conscience accuses and the child with a clear conscience, the one that would desperately have one before her Lord, she confesses that sin to the person that she's

offended and turns from it and sets things right.

### **A Man Who Trusts God**

Would you have a clear conscience you must be justified by faith, you must fear God, you must obey God, you must repent of your sin. And, finally, you must trust God. You've got to trust him. If you're going to have a clear conscience, you've got to trust him when it's hard to do. Paul's in prison. He's tired. I've never been attacked by a mob, but I'm sure it's unsettling. Then to be whisked off the sixty miles to Caesarea, he must be exhausted. But when he's given the opportunity to stand before the governor Felix, he discharges his responsibility to preach the gospel. He'll have clear conscience before God and before man. And the temptations that are going to come to us, those temptations where we're going to be tempted to turn from the way that is right, and our conscience is pleading with us not to do it, those are the times in which our character will be forged. When we're tired, when we know we have to discipline our children, it's in times when our marriages are on rocky ground—it's in those when we must heed our consciences as we're exhorted to do that which is right and to maintain marital integrity. It's in times when we're without that we're going to be tempted to financial dishonesty. And it's in those times, like Paul's experiencing here, that when Christianity is attacked, we're going to have to summon the courage to stand up and speak if we're going to keep a clear conscience before God and before man.

### **II. Felix, the Judge**

So, Paul is on trial. We've seen the prosecutor, Tertullus. We've seen Paul, the defendant. Now, let's meet Felix, the judge. You know the world would say that Felix was a lucky man. He was born a slave. His brother was slave in the household of Claudius who would become emperor. And all sorts of benefits came to Felix because of his brother's relationship to Claudius including being assigned to this important position as the Roman governor in the province of Judea. He was given so much and he squandered it all. He was a violent man. He was not averse to killing his opponents and putting out contracts especially upon those who held prominent positions. He was an administrative failure. He was financially dishonest. Given so much, he squandered it all.

### **A Wicked Woman**

And let me talk a little bit about his wife, Drusilla, because she becomes an important person in Acts chapter 24. Drusilla was a notoriously evil woman. But, I suppose she came by her wickedness honestly. After all she was the great granddaughter of Herod the Great. You that Herod who killed one of his wives, killed three of his sons, and slew the infant baby boys of Bethlehem? That was her great grandfather. You know her father. He was struck down in Acts chapter

12 for his monstrous arrogance toward God. You know her uncle. He was the one who killed John the Baptist. And she was an extremely wicked woman. Absolutely gorgeous according to the records. She had married some client king out in the far reaches of the Roman empire and she and Felix first met when Felix traveled out there, saw her and then, with the help of a sorcerer, seduced her, committed adultery and brought her back to Judea. Drusilla, a Jewess, she knew that God's law forbids adultery. She sinned against her conscience. And Felix knew it too because the law of God is written on the human heart.

### **A Wicked Man**

And Felix resists the voice of conscience. He did that when he was mal-administering his governorship. He resisted the voice of conscience when he stole Drusilla from her husband. And now he resists the voice of conscience after he hears this case. Knowing that Paul is innocent, he decides to keep him in prison. We know what he's hoping for. He's hoping for a bribe. You know, Paul who's traveling all over the place has brought a large offering to Jerusalem. Perhaps he'll pay a bribe to me for his release. Or perhaps these Jews will come up with money to bribe me to keep him in prison. He was a man on the take.

In any case, his wife Drusilla arrives and I suppose there's not much to do to entertain oneself in Caesarea. So, one night Felix and Drusilla, they summons Paul and they give him the opportunity to speak to them. They want to hear what he has to say, more about himself. Now, I don't know about you, but if I was given this private audience with my judge I would take opportunity of it to lambast those that had brought false charges against me and to defend myself. But Paul doesn't berate his accusers. He's a minister of the gospel and to keep a clear conscience before God and man he presses the claims of Jesus Christ upon Felix and Drusilla. He preaches to them the gospel.

### **Pressing Home the Truth-Claims of the Gospel**

Look with me at verse 24. Paul spoke with Felix and Drusilla about faith in Christ Jesus, about their need to turn from their sin and to trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation, that their only hope to be reconciled to God and to prepare for the coming resurrection and judgment day was to put their faith in Jesus Christ the Savior. And then as should always be done when one presses the gospel, he talks about Christian ethics. Paul reasons with them. We're told, verse 25, about righteousness and self-control and coming judgment. Pressing upon Felix, "You haven't acted righteously. You've been a monster in your position. You've abused the power that's been entrusted to you. You've taken innocent human life. You've laid aside the high standards that should govern marriage. Self-control. Felix, you and Drusilla, you've not exercised self-control over your sexual desires and you've brought upon yourself God's judgment. And, oh, be assured that that judgment, Felix and Drusilla, is coming."

How we need, how we need in our major cities in the United States and in our nation's capital, we need men that will proclaim the gospel just like Paul does before Felix and Drusilla. Talking about Christian ethics, about righteousness, self-control, and also about the coming judgment when every leader is going to be ushered into the presence of God and there have to give an account before his judgment throne about how they've governed, how they've treated those who've been entrusted to their care. And to know that on that great Day of Judgment there is no hope for them unless their faith is resting in Jesus Christ.

### **Another Opportunity?**

So Paul presses the gospel and its claims on Felix. And Felix is alarmed but he sends Paul away. Verse 25, when I get an opportunity, I will summon you. And it never came, that opportunity. Paul was in prison there for another few years. I'm sure they met again. But never again was Felix's conscience so alarmed. And, you see, that's what happens when you resist the voice of conscience, when you fail to agree with it, when it accuses you. You do that long enough, if you make that a habit, then that alarm grows quieter and quieter until finally it's silenced. That's what happened to Felix. And he forfeited not only his governorship, he forfeited his own soul. Don't let that happen to you. Is there some behavior about which your conscience is accusing you? Well, tonight is the night when you need to have a clear conscience before God and it begins by coming to him through faith in Jesus Christ. Now, what about Drusilla? There's no indication that she was ever alarmed.

You covenant children need to hear this. I imagine as a Jew Drusilla grew up hearing the law of God read, the law of God that said you shall not commit adultery. And she resisted that voice of conscience year after year after year. And unless something happened to her that's not recorded anywhere, she passed into a Christ-less eternity. Young covenant child, don't let that be your testimony. Heed the voice of conscience tonight. Turn from your sin to your Savior.

### **Application**

Let's wrap things up. Three things I want you to take away from the text tonight.

#### **Keep a Clear Conscience**

Keep a clear conscience. Paul says, "I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man" and so should you and I.

#### **Keep an Informed Conscience**

Keep an informed conscience. Our conscience has to be informed by the Word

of God or the verdicts that our conscience renders will be askew. When I was in my early twenties, I had a dinner one night with an elder that was actively involved in a mainline denomination and I enjoyed that dinner until the dessert. And then he shared with me that he had done a wonderful thing that week that he believed helped a young woman get back on the right track. He'd paid for her abortion. And he did it with a clear conscience because his conscience was not informed by the Word of God. Read the Scriptures. Sit under the ministry of the Word. Make sure that your conscience is informed by the Word of God.

### **Beware of a Seared Conscience**

And then, beware of a seared conscience; 1 Timothy 4:2, "A cauterized conscience," that's what it says in Greek. To cauterize is to destroy the skin and the nerve endings by burning to render that area insensitive to pain. And if you resist, as Felix and Drusilla did, the voice of your conscience long enough your conscience will become deadened, no longer raising alarms apart from a miracle of God. You'll be lost. Don't let that happen to you. Today is a gift. Tonight is a gift. Reflect on the condition of your soul. Reflect on the condition of your conscience. Oh, we have a good idea of what happened to Felix and Drusilla because they resisted their conscience.

### **A Good Testimony**

But think about Paul. He'll remain under arrest right to the end of Acts 28. He'll be under house arrest. After that time, he'll be released. He'll undertake more missionary activities. Then, he'll be imprisoned again. From this imprisonment there will be no release. He knows that he will die. And with that in mind he writes to his beloved son in the faith, Timothy, and he says to Timothy, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, the day of his appearing." That was Paul's testimony. And at the end of your life, brothers and sisters in Christ, that can be your testimony. And it will be your testimony as you take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man. Let us pray.

*Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, we love the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of sinners. Oh, draw us so close to him by the power of the Holy Spirit that we'll be ever so careful not to offend him or to offend our fellow man. Father, if there is anyone here tonight who day after day, month after month, year after year has been resisting the voice of your conscience, the conscience that you have placed within them, may this be the day that they heed the accusations of conscience, repent of sin, and turn to Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. For it's in his name that we pray, Amen.*



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