

Gaining a Clear Conscience

- A clear conscience involves that inner freedom of spirit toward God and others that comes by knowing that God's holiness is not offended by one's thought or action, and that no one can point a finger at you and say, "You've offended me, and you've never asked for my forgiveness."

A. The scope of gaining a clear conscience

- God
- Family
- Relatives
- Employers/ teachers
- Former friends
- Others

B. Identifying the problem:

- The greatest single hindrance to gaining a clear conscience is the feeling that the ones we offended were wrong too! In fact, we often feel that they were mostly wrong. Our focus on blaming them balances our own guilt and forces us to live with both guilt and blame.
- It is our natural inclination to find other people or circumstances which are to blame for what we have done in order to justify or excuse our offenses.

The greater our guilt, the more we must blame. The resulting bitterness and guilt are devastating to our mental and emotional balance.

- A splinter and a beam are actually the same size when viewed from a reverse perspective. When we sense that our brother is offended because of "some little thing we did to him," we must remember that in his eye this "little thing" is a beam. We may think we were only 90 percent wrong, but in his eye we were 90 percent wrong.

C. The destructive power of wrong attitudes:

- It is essential that we recognize and confess wrong actions against those whom we have offended. But it is even more important to discern, confess, and change wrong attitudes which were either caused by or resulted from our wrong actions.

- This is more difficult than we realize. We are so involved with our own thoughts and emotions that we fail to realize the attitudes which we are actually reflecting to the people around us.
- More than we realize, people are reacting to our attitudes. It is, therefore, essential that we learn how to “judge ourselves” in wrong attitudes in order that we are not judged by others.

Step 1: List their offenses

The first step in solving conflicts with a particular person is to privately list all the offenses which he has committed against you.

Examples:

- Promising to do something for me and failing to keep the promise
- Punish me for things I didn't do
- Being too strict in that punishment
- Giving more attention and love to other members of the family
- Refusing to understand me
- Speaking harshly
- Perceived rejection by the other
- Not being there when I needed them

Step 2 : List your offenses

It's easy to remember the faults of others, but when it comes to listing our own faults, we may discover a lapse of memory. To compensate for this difficulty, the following are suggested:

- Poor attitude
- Ungratefulness
- Stubbornness
- Untruthfulness
- Bitterness
- Laziness

Step 3: Purpose to ask for forgiveness

This is by far the most difficult step. It must be done in an attitude of complete sincerity and genuine repentance.

1. Identify the basic offenses: It is important to distinguish between immediate

offenses and basic offenses. They are not always the same. It does little good to ask for forgiveness for a small offense when in reality that offense is only a fractional part of a much greater offense.

Basic offenses:

- Wounded pride
- Expecting to be served and failing to serve others
- Harboring resentment
- Laziness
- Disrespectfulness
- Ungratefulness
- Stubbornness
- Self-righteousness

2. Ask for forgiveness for basic offenses:

There are several ways to ask for forgiveness which are guaranteed not to work – such as, “I was wrong, but you were too;” “If I was wrong, please forgive me; “I am sorry;” etc..

There is one genuine statement which reflects true sincerity and humility. – “God has convicted me of how wrong I have been in (my attitude and actions.) I know I have wronged you in this, and I’ve come to ask, will you forgive me?”

The Power of a Clear Conscience

- A sensitive conscience is a mark of a mature Christian. Hebrews 5:13-14
- Paul testifies to the importance of a clear conscience Acts 24:16; II Cor. 1:12
- Paul warned Timothy that next to his faith, a clear conscience was his most essential weapon. I Timothy 1:18-19
- Peter explains why a clear conscience is essential in order to witness. I Pet. 3:16

- Even health and physical appearance are affected by the lack of a clear conscience. Psalm 32:1,3,4

Reinforcing the Conscience

Since it is possible to diminish the effectiveness of the conscience by disregarding or rationalizing conviction, it is important to identify the forces producing conviction in the conscience.

Power point slide on the conscience

- Light of Christ – The light of Christ is an awareness of the basic qualities which God wants to develop within each life. These correspond to the essential qualities of His nature. “This is the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world.” John 1:9
- The Word of God – The Word of God more clearly defines the basic qualities to be developed. As we see the standards in Scripture, we become more sensitive to our need to develop them.
- Alertness to The Light – When any one of these qualities is deficient or violated, we are sensitive to this condition. The sensitivity itself is the conviction of our conscience. “... which show the works of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another.” Romans 2:14, 15, and 1:18-21
- Reproofs of Life – God has ordained that the individuals and circumstances surrounding our lives will reinforce our sensitivity to the qualities which should be developed within us. Their reproofs are used by God to reinforce conviction. “A fool despises his father’s instruction: but he that regards reproof is prudent.” Proverbs 15:5

The Purpose of a Clear Conscience

A. Boldness to witness

If your credibility is damaged it is very hard to witness. It is important how the world sees your character.

I Peter 3:15, 16

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

B. Freedom to resolve conflicts

A lack of a clear conscience may be the one stumbling block to the salvation of others. By resolving conflicts a path to Christ may be made for others.

C. Alertness to make wise decisions

By having a clear conscience, a believer then has unfettered communication with the Father. A unclear conscience causes one to neglect the Word of God thus he is unable to gain Scriptural counsel.

D. The Power to overcome temptation

When a believer gives in to temptation he gains a defiles conscience. Satan uses this to defeat a Christian in even-larger temptations. Rarely is the Christian aware of the final “Price tag” on the temporary pleasures of sin. The guilt of his transgression becomes Satan’s method of blackmail to go deeper and deeper into sin.

E. Ability to build genuine friendships

The most basic quality needed for friendships is sincere humility. This is the one quality which is sure to result from gaining a clear conscience.

Final point: Proverbs 28:13 – “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”

Common Rationalizations

One of the hardest deaths to die is the death to pride. The mind is ingenious at devising reasons which will circumvent or postpone death to pride.

Anyone who has ever experienced making things right will remember the many reasons or excuses he had for not really having to go back and ask forgiveness. Here are a few common rationalizations:

1. It happened a long time ago. If it happened a long time ago, why do you still remember it? Since you have remembered it for such a long time this is the more reason to make it right.
2. The one I wronged has moved away. With all the available resources today. A good faith effort needs to be made.
3. It was such a small offense. At this point the question must be asked, "Has it been eating away at your conscience?" If so, it is big enough to be taken care of.
4. Things have gotten better. Often those who purpose to go back and make things right with one whom they are not getting along will find the situation improving before they will ask for forgiveness. Often this improvement is God's way of preparing the other person to forgive us, but we mistakenly use it as a reason for not asking for forgiveness.
5. I'm just being too sensitive. A sensitive nature is not something to shy away from but rather develop. Strong spiritual meat belongs to those who are mature Christians. In other words they use their senses to discern between good and evil. (Heb. 5:14)
6. No one is perfect. That's true. But apparently the standard of perfect you have set is too low. Your own conscience confirms the fact that it is too low, and your conflicts with others also testify to this fact.
7. They won't understand. You'll be amazed how clearly they will understand. Our job is to obey; God will take care of their understanding. If they don't understand, maybe it's your asking forgiveness that has convicted them about their need to ask for forgiveness.
8. Making it right will involve money which I don't have. Better to have an honest debt than a dishonest weight of conscience. Borrow the money if need be, or make arrangements from the one you stole to make payments. God is able to provide money in every instance, even in this one. God will honor your honesty.
9. I'll do it later. Procrastination is one of the worst enemies to a clear

conscience. You can be sure the “later”, if it ever comes, will never be as good a time as now. “Later” there will probably other things to make right. Perhaps even because of death there will be no opportunity to gain forgiveness from those you wronged.

10. I'll only do it over again. This is truly a statement from one who has never asked forgiveness in the right way! If you offend again, you must ask for forgiveness again. You will discover that the pain of truly humbling yourself and asking forgiveness will be much greater than the pain of self-control.
11. The other person was mostly wrong. You don't have to live with his conscience. You have to live with yours. No doubt he is also using this as an excuse for not making it right with you. If you make the first step and ask for forgiveness, you will probably be surprised to hear him ask you to forgive him for his wrong. Someone has to begin the humbling process. Let it be you and you will receive the greater blessing.
12. I'll leave the worst offense until last. In asking forgiveness, always make the worst offense right first. If you don't, you will find that abnormal guilt will center around little inconsequential wrongs which really don't need special forgiveness.
13. If I purpose not to do it again, won't that be enough? No doing it in the future will not erase the wrongs of the past. The one you have wronged will not know your purposing, and he will think that your good behavior is a sly way of getting something you want. This or some similar false accusation will be so discouraging to you that you may become bitter.

(Example: lying)
14. They are not Christians – What will they think? They will think that they have finally discovered a true example of a Christian.
15. If I go back I will get my friend into trouble. It needn't be if you go back in the right way. The basic requirement for asking forgiveness in the right way is to concentrate on only that which you have done. To involve someone else is to shift part of the blame. This is not complete death to pride.

How to gain a clear conscience

There are several basic steps which must be followed in order to receive the forgiveness of the one who has been wronged.

1. List those whom you have offended: Use the assistance of “two mirrors”. The mirror of memory and the mirror of others’ attitudes towards you. Behind each of these mirrors must be the mirror of God’s Word. We are instructed not only to look into the mirror of the Word but to correct the wrong that we see.

James 1:23-25 “ Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.”

Our memory is constructed so we tend to forget unpleasant events. With this said, it is quite significant that we are not able to forget certain events involving wrongs which we have committed against others.

Memory

Examples:

- Have you stolen money or other items from stores, family members, neighbors, employers, or others?
- Have you lied to anyone?
- Have you lost your temper with anyone?
- Have you damaged the reputation of anyone? Have you engaged in gossip, back-biting, slander or other activities which have hurt another’s reputation?
- Have you been ungrateful for what others have done for you.
- Have you held a bitter spirit toward anyone? Has someone offended you and instead of forgiving them, have you maintained a bitter spirit toward them.

- Have you rebelled against or resisted the authority of those over you? Have your attitude or actions disrespected someone in authority over you?
- Have you had a prideful spirit? Have you conveyed that you or your work is more important than that of those around you? Have you illustrated this with an argumentative spirit or a disinterest in ordinary people
- Have you failed to give genuine love when others reacted to you? Did you respond back to them with a genuine desire to learn and meet their real needs, or did you react to them because they reacted to you.

Others Attitudes toward you

Whether we realize it or not, we are projecting attitudes to the people around us. These attitudes cause them to form an image of us. When people react to us or build walls against us, it is important for us to look at their reaction and see if they are mirroring back to us the wrong attitudes which we have had toward them.

- Do people observe a lack of gratefulness for what they have done for me?
- Do people avoid me because they feel I don't need them, and that they are only a bother to my life? Do they feel I am sincerely interested in them and their success.
- Do people feel that I am too busy for them and am not interested in the problems that they are facing?
- Does my employer feel that my heart is not really in the work I am doing, and that I am really there for my benefit rather than helping him reach his goals.

2. List your offenses in order of importance

It is very important to ask forgiveness first of those who have been offended most. If this is not done, it is possible to attach an exaggerated sense of guilt to trivial offenses.

As offenses are dealt with, one level of guilt decreases.

3. Carefully choose the right wording

We must think through the words we are going to use in asking for forgiveness, and we must be sure they reflect the following insights and attitudes:

- Your words must identify the basic offense. To help you identify the basic offense, put yourself in the other person's place and relive the offense through their eyes and feelings. Think of all the harm and hurt and disappointment your offense has caused them. Let your offense break your heart.
- Your words must reflect full repentance and sincere humility. Just as soon as you purpose to ask for forgiveness, pride will come to your rescue. Pride tries to assure you that you weren't really so bad and that they were wrong too.

4. Determine the proper time and method to ask for forgiveness.

Matt 5:23 -24, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Luke 17:4, "If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."

Notice that each time the offender must return to the one he offended and ask for forgiveness. In going back consider the following:

- The best method of approach
 - Phone call – Best if a moral offense or someone has moved away
 - Personal visit – Sometimes even more appropriate than a phone call
 - Letter – Don't use this method. People use this as it's the easiest of the pride.
- Is this convenient time for the other person? Go when you are reasonably sure they can see you or make an appointment.
- Is it a time when you could be interrupted? It is best to be alone as not to cause embarrassment.

- Would he or she be in the proper mood to grant forgiveness? If something has just happened through your fault and as a result the temper of the ones you wronged are out of control, this would be a poor time to ask for forgiveness.

Special cautions in asking forgiveness:

1. Confess only to those offended
2. Clear greatest offense first
3. Avoid giving sensual details.
4. Expect possible rejection of your request. It is important to clear your conscience
5. Be as brief and clear as possible. Do not seem that you are justifying yourself.
6. Clear your conscience quickly
7. Wait for God's time to witness. Don't combine asking for forgiveness and witnessing

Special situations

- What if you can't find the one offended? Commit the problem to the Lord and reaffirm your desire to make it right in the future if it is possible.