



## CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 189

A more subtle form of legalism comes up often in the church negatively impacting the believers' life of sanctification. Such legalism usually pertains to matters or activities which the Bible does not address explicitly, causing believers to disagree and to even break fellowship with one another. In order to better understand and deal with this kind of legalism we first need to briefly look at the topic of conscience.

**Conscience** – God has given all people a conscience. Though the Gentiles did not receive the written law of Moses, as had the Jews, they still attempted to keep its basic principles. This testifies to the fact that all human beings have an inward knowledge of God (Roman 1:19, 21; 2:14-15). As part of His general revelation God has implanted certain innate knowledge of Him and His moral law in all human beings. Based on this the human conscience acts as a warning tool which judges what a person does as either right or wrong. Thus we can say that the conscience is God's voice within the soul.

As with all aspects of man, the conscience is also badly defiled in fallen man; and though a general knowledge of God and His law is evident, fallen man strives to suppress and obstruct its influence. The more a sinner sins the more he silences and sears his conscience, and his heart becomes more obstinate against God, calling evil good and good evil (Psalm 81:10-12; Isaiah 5:20; 1 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:15).

Those who have been regenerated and redeemed by God have had their minds renewed and consciences awakened by Him, who now have a desire to do that which is good and bring glory to God. However, it is vital for us to protect and properly inform our consciences, for they can still be weakened by sin and false doctrine, condemning us for something the Word of God does not condemn, or commending us for something the Word of God does not commend. The conscience must be informed and reinforced by the Word of God in order to judge biblically (Proverbs 28:14; 1 Timothy 1:18-19). Thus, the more we grow in our knowledge of the Word of God the more it will inform and shape our conscience, allowing it to function properly, leading us to make decisions which please God. A classic and important example of disagreements arising between Christians with weak and strong consciences is found in Romans 14.

**Adiaphora** – In this chapter Paul is dealing with morally indifferent matters (adiaphora), where there is nothing inherently right or wrong about them. The eating of meat or the observance of certain days, and other such issues, are nonessential or trivial matters, things that are in themselves morally neutral, over which Christian should not quarrel or separate. Also in this chapter Paul refers to the strong believers and the weak believers. The strong Jewish Christians were those who understood that meat in itself was not unclean, that the Old Covenant dietary laws were fulfilled in Christ and were no longer binding, and thus correctly recognizing their freedom in Christ they ate meat freely (Mark 7:15-19; Acts 10:13-15; 1 Timothy 4:4-5). And the mature Gentile Christians were those who recognized that there is only one God, and idols are nothing, and thus correctly recognizing their freedom in Christ they ate meat freely (1 Corinthians 8:4-6). The weak Christians (Jews and Gentiles) had issues with these matters. As a result of these, the believers were judging, even despising one another, and thus endangering the unity of the church. Paul finds fault with both groups as before God they were all acceptable (vv. 3-4).

**Christian liberty** – Regarding such morally indifferent matters, Paul is saying that God has left us free to act according to our mind, or our conscience, which as stated earlier should be informed by the Word of God in order to make the right decisions, and for the right motives (v. 5-6). Again we note that Paul is not here referring to essential or explicit teachings of the Bible, for which no compromise is permitted.

Paul says that we don't belong to ourselves but to God; He is our Master and Judge, and thus will judge us perfectly. So in all such matters where God is silent we are to withhold judgment on our fellow Christians, for this is not our job but God's. His judgment is the only one that matters (vv. 7-13).