

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

SOTERIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Salvation

By Grace Alone, Through Faith Alone, In Christ Alone, To the Glory of God Alone

UNIT 6: JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE ALONE THROUGH FAITH ALONE

The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls

Lesson 20

Justification and the Believer's Conscience

The Peace That Flows from a Right Standing Before God

The Verdict Has Been Pronounced, and It Will Never Be Reversed

"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"

Key Texts: Romans 5:1–2; 8:1, 31–39; Hebrews 10:19–22; 1 John 3:19–22; Psalm 32:1–2; Psalm 103:12

"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Romans 8:1, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Lesson 20 is the pastoral climax of Unit 6. Everything that the preceding five lessons have established about justification, its forensic character, the double imputation at its heart, the alien righteousness that grounds it, the verse-by-verse exegesis of its most comprehensive statement, and the defense of its content against the Roman Catholic alternative, all of it has been building toward this moment: the moment when the doctrine meets the conscience. Justification is not finally a doctrine to be mastered but a reality to be received; it is not ultimately an argument to be won but a peace to be inhabited; and the specific peace it produces in the conscience of the person who has genuinely understood and received it is the most practically transformative pastoral experience that the Christian life offers.

The conscience is the interior court of the soul, the faculty by which the human person assesses her own moral and spiritual condition, passes judgment on her own conduct, and renders a verdict of condemnation or acquittal over the question of her standing before God. It is the conscience that is addressed by Paul's declaration in Romans 5:1 ("having been justified by faith, we have peace with God"), not merely the intellect informed by a doctrine, but the deepest self-evaluating capacity of the soul, whose default orientation is the registration of guilt and whose liberation by the gospel is the most personal and most lasting of the gospel's fruits. The peace of Romans 5:1 is not the peace of a problem solved; it is the peace of a war ended, the specific, permanent, legally grounded peace of a person who knows that the conflict between her guilty record and the holy God's righteous demands has been resolved, finally and irrevocably, by the verdict of justification.

Many believers live with a conscience that is chronically troubled despite their genuine faith in Christ. They know the doctrine of justification; they can articulate its content with varying degrees of precision; they assent to its truth as a theological proposition. And yet the peace that Romans 5:1 promises, the peace that the Heidelberg Catechism describes as the "only comfort in life and death", is intermittent at best, fugitive at worst, and often almost entirely absent from the daily experience of the Christian life. The conscience continues to accuse; the guilty sense of standing under divine disapproval persists; the approach to God in prayer carries the dread of the unworthy rather than the confidence of the justified. This is the pastoral problem that this lesson is designed to address: not by providing a new doctrine for the intellect to process, but by showing how the doctrine of justification, already known and believed, must be applied with specific pastoral precision to the specific accusations of the troubled conscience.

This lesson will proceed through six major sections: the peace with God that justification produces (Romans 5:1–2); the comprehensive removal of condemnation (Romans 8:1); the courtroom closed and the verdict irrevocable (Romans 8:31–39); the distinction between justification and the feeling of justification; the calibration of the conscience by Scripture rather than by feelings (including Luther's tower experience as the paradigmatic account of conscience-liberation by the gospel); and the pastoral balm, the specific, named, personally directed declaration that the verdict has been pronounced and will never be reversed.

The governing conviction of this lesson is that the doctrine of justification is not merely true in the abstract but is the most powerful pastoral tool available for the care of souls burdened by guilt, shame, and the lingering sense of condemnation. The pastor who knows this doctrine deeply and can apply it precisely and warmly to the specific accusations of specific consciences has in her hands the specific answer to the specific problem that afflicts more of the people in her pastoral care than she may yet realize. The peace that surpasses understanding (Philippians

4:7) flows not from a generalized sense of divine benevolence but from the specific, theologically precise, personally received truth that the Judge of all the earth has pronounced the verdict of righteousness over the believing sinner, on the basis of a righteousness that is perfect, permanent, and completely sufficient for every charge that any accuser can bring.

I. Peace with God

Romans 5:1–2 and the First Fruit of Justification

A. *The Peace of Romans 5:1*

Romans 5:1 is the first great statement of justification’s fruit in the conscience: “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (NASB 1995). The verse deserves the closest possible attention in each of its elements, because each element is a specific pastoral word addressed to the specific situation of the troubled conscience. “Therefore”: the peace follows as the logical and necessary consequence of the justification that chapters 3–4 have established. It is not a hope to be striven after; it is the conclusion that follows from the premise. If the premise is true, if the believing sinner has been declared righteous on the basis of Christ’s imputed righteousness, then the conclusion follows necessarily: peace with God exists.

“Having been justified by faith”: the perfect passive participle (*dikaiothēntes*, from *dikaioō*) indicates a completed past action with present ongoing result. The justification has occurred; it is a settled past event whose results are present and permanent. The peace that follows from it is equally settled: it rests on a completed divine act, not on a current spiritual performance. “We have peace” (*eirenen echomen*): the present indicative, the simple statement of a present reality. Not “we are pursuing peace,” not “we hope for peace,” not “we feel peace when we are spiritually consistent,” but we have peace, present tense, declarative mood, the statement of a fact about the believer’s current status before God.

“With God”: the specific relational dimension of the peace that justification produces. This is not the psychological peace of a calm mind or the circumstantial peace of favorable conditions; it is the relational peace of a healed relationship, the specific end of the hostility between the sinner and the holy God that sin created (Romans 5:10 will describe the unjustified as “enemies” of God). The peace is not merely the absence of hostility; it is the positive reconciliation of the relationship, the establishment of the friendship with God that the enmity of sin had destroyed. And this peace is “through our Lord Jesus Christ”, it is not merely declared from a distance but mediated through the specific person of the incarnate, crucified, risen, and ascended Lord, whose atoning work is the ground of the peace and whose ongoing intercession is its perpetual maintenance.

Romans 5:2 adds two further dimensions of the peace’s fullness: “through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God” (NASB 1995). The “introduction into this grace” (*prosagōgē*, access, introduction) is the specific pastoral reality that the peace with God produces: the justified believer now has permanent access to the divine presence, approaching the throne of grace with the confidence of one who has been declared righteous rather than the dread of one who knows herself to be under condemnation. The “grace in which we stand” is the justified standing itself, a standing that is inhabited, that the believer lives in daily, that is as present and as real as the air she breathes. And the “exultation in hope of the glory of God” is the forward-looking dimension of the present peace: the peace that justification produces is not merely the resolution of the past (the guilty record charged to Christ) but the orientation of the future toward the glory that is the destination of every justified soul.

B. *The Psalms and the Peace of Forgiveness*

The pastoral reality of the peace that justification produces is not a New Testament novelty; it echoes through the whole of the Psalms wherever the psalmist's experience of divine forgiveness produces the specific, joy-flooded relief that the conscience at rest knows. Psalm 32:1–2 provides the most direct Old Testament anticipation of Romans 5:1: “How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit!” (NASB 1995). Paul cites this psalm in Romans 4:7–8 precisely as the Old Testament description of the justification of the ungodly: the forgiveness of transgression, the covering of sin, and the non-imputation of iniquity are the three-fold description of what the justified sinner receives, and the specific emotional register that this reception produces is blessedness, the deep-settled joy of a conscience that has been relieved of its accusation.

Psalm 103:12 provides the most vivid spatial metaphor for the completeness of the forgiveness: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (NASB 1995). The east-west distance is not a finite measurement; it is the description of a direction that has no endpoint, the infinite removal of the sins that the conscience has been rehearsing and the divine tribunal has charged and Christ has borne. This is the specific pastoral word for the conscience that cannot stop revisiting the specific sins that the forgiveness has covered: they have been removed as far as the east is from the west, which is to say infinitely, irreversibly, and completely. The conscience that rehearses sins already confessed and forgiven is rehearsing something that God has removed to the infinite distance, and the appropriate response to that rehearsal is not more repentance (which was already rendered) but the grateful reception of the forgiveness that has already been granted.

II. No Condemnation

Romans 8:1 and the Comprehensive Removal of Every Charge

A. *The Most Unqualified Declaration in the New Testament*

Romans 8:1 is the most unqualified, most comprehensive, most absolute declaration of the justified believer's freedom from condemnation in the entire New Testament: “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (NASB 1995). The verse stands at the beginning of Romans 8, the most glorious chapter in the most theologically magnificent letter in the New Testament, the chapter that moves from no condemnation (v. 1) through the life of the Spirit (vv. 2–27) to the golden chain of eternal security (vv. 28–30) to the doxological celebration of the love that cannot be separated from those in Christ (vv. 31–39). And the entire chapter rests on the foundation of this opening verse: “there is now no condemnation.”

Every word of Romans 8:1 deserves sustained pastoral attention. “Therefore”: the connection to the preceding context is essential. The “therefore” reaches back at least to the end of Romans 7 (the distressed cry of the person who does the very thing she hates, and the doxological resolution of verse 25: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”) and all the way back to the propitiation of 3:25 and the justification of 3:26. The freedom from condemnation is the consequence of everything that has been established about the justified standing in chapters 3–7.

“Now” (Greek: nun): the eschatological marker of the present age of the new covenant, the age inaugurated by Christ's death and resurrection, the age in which the justified standing is already fully and permanently available. The freedom from condemnation is not a future hope to be received after death; it is a present reality, available

now, to be inhabited now. “No condemnation” (Greek: *ouden katakrima*): the absolute, categorical negation. Not “less condemnation,” not “partial condemnation,” not “conditional freedom from condemnation.” *Ouden katakrima*: not one single item of condemnation. Every charge has been answered. Every accusation has been addressed. Every element of the guilty verdict that the sinner’s record warranted has been charged to Christ, borne at the cross, and discharged by the resurrection’s declaration that the penalty was paid in full. There is nothing left.

“For those who are in Christ Jesus”: the specific locative phrase that defines the beneficiaries of the no-condemnation declaration. The freedom from condemnation is not universal; it belongs to those who are in Christ, united to Him by the Spirit through the instrument of faith, joined to the One whose righteousness has been imputed to their account and whose penalty-bearing has discharged their guilt. The “in Christ” is the union with Christ that Lessons 8 and 9 established as the organizing center of the entire doctrine of salvation: those who are in Christ are those whose sin has been charged to Him and whose righteousness has been credited from Him, and whose standing before the divine tribunal is therefore the standing of the One in whom they are found.

B. The Specific Content of the No-Condemnation

The no-condemnation of Romans 8:1 is not a vague divine amnesia, a general sense in which God has decided to overlook the sinner’s past and begin afresh. It is the specific, legal, forensically precise declaration that flows from the specific legal acts described in chapters 3–7: the propitiation that satisfied the divine wrath (3:25), the justification that declared the sinner righteous (3:26–28), the imputation that credited Christ’s righteousness to the believer’s account (4:3–6), the death and resurrection of Christ that removed the debt and secured the standing (4:25), and the peace with God that is the relational expression of the forensic verdict (5:1). The no-condemnation is the comprehensive summary of all of it: every specific component of the condemnation that the sinner’s record warranted has been specifically addressed and specifically resolved in the specific acts of atonement and justification that the preceding chapters describe.

The pastoral significance of this specificity is considerable. The troubled conscience that is rehearsing specific sins, specific failures, specific patterns of transgression, specific acts that the memory returns to with particular weight, needs not a general divine amnesty but the specific declaration that the specific sins it is rehearsing have been specifically charged to Christ, specifically borne at the cross, and specifically discharged by the propitiation. “Not one item of condemnation” includes the specific item that the conscience is rehearsing at this moment. The no-condemnation is as comprehensive as the guilt that produced it and as specific as the atonement that resolved it. Every sin, every failure, every charge outstanding is included in the categorical negation of Romans 8:1. Nothing has been missed; nothing remains.

III. The Courtroom Closed and the Verdict Irrevocable

Romans 8:31–39 and the Doxology of the Justified

A. Romans 8:31–34: Who Will Bring a Charge?

Romans 8:31–39 is the most magnificent sustained doxology in the entire New Testament, and it opens with a series of rhetorical questions that function as the pastoral application of everything that has been established in

the letter since 3:21. The questions are not abstract theological puzzles; they are the courtroom challenges of those who have been declared righteous and are now daring anyone to bring a successful charge against them. “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?” (v. 31, NASB 1995). The “these things” refers to the entire golden chain of 8:29–30 and the comprehensive promise of verse 28, all things working together for good for those who are called according to God’s purpose. If the God who foreknew, predestined, called, justified, and will glorify is for the believer, then any opposition to the believer is opposition that cannot ultimately prevail.

Verse 32 provides the logical ground for the confidence of verse 31: “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” (NASB 1995). The *a fortiori* logic is among the most powerful in the New Testament: the God who gave the infinitely costly gift of His own Son for sinners will certainly not withhold the infinitely less costly gifts of providential care, spiritual provision, and ultimate glorification from those for whom He gave the greatest gift. The cross is the permanent, historically enacted, publicly demonstrated proof of the divine love for those who are in Christ, and nothing that occurs after the cross can represent a diminution of that love, because nothing subsequent to the cross exceeds its cost.

Verses 33–34 pose the courtroom challenges that are the practical pastoral heart of the passage: “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us” (NASB 1995). The rhetorical force of these questions is the force of the unanswerable challenge: name the accuser who can successfully bring a charge against those for whom the divine Judge has already pronounced the verdict of righteousness. The specific potential accusers are real: the devil who is described in Revelation 12:10 as “the accuser of our brethren”; the law whose demands have not been met by the sinner’s own performance; the memory and the conscience that rehearse the sins of the past; and death itself, which might seem to represent the ultimate divine repudiation of the sinner’s standing. Against each of these, the answer is the same: God is the one who justifies. The divine Justifier cannot simultaneously be the divine Condemner; the Judge who has pronounced the verdict cannot reverse it.

Verse 34’s description of Christ provides the specific pastoral word for the four potential accusers. Christ died: the death that bore the penalty that every accusation of guilt could produce has been endured, there is nothing the accuser can charge that has not already been addressed at the cross. Christ was raised: the resurrection is the Father’s declaration that the penalty was paid in full and the atonement was accepted, the guilty verdict cannot be reinstated over one for whom the acquitting resurrection has been pronounced. Christ is at the right hand of God: the position of supreme authority and completed redemptive work, from which no charge can dislodge the One who purchased the standing. Christ intercedes: the present, ongoing, priestly ministry of the ascended Lord on behalf of every believer, maintaining the standing that His death purchased and His resurrection sealed. The courtroom is not merely closed; the advocate who purchased the justified standing is permanently present, permanently interceding, at the highest possible position of authority.

B. Romans 8:35–39: Nothing Can Separate

Romans 8:35–39 closes the chapter and the unit with the most comprehensive statement of the inseparability of the justified believer from the love of God in Christ Jesus: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” (v. 35, NASB 1995). The specific catalogue, tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, is not an abstract list of

theological categories; it is the description of the actual circumstances in which Paul and his companions were living, and in which Christians across every century of the church's history have found themselves. The question is whether any of these circumstances can break the connection between the believer and the love that the divine Justifier has for those declared righteous in His Son.

The answer of verses 37–39 is the most absolute negative available to human language: “Nay, in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (NASB 1995). The comprehensiveness of the list, covering every possible temporal and spiritual, present and future, cosmic and creaturely category of potential separating force, establishes the inseparability with a thoroughness that leaves no category unaddressed. Not death (which might seem to represent the final divine judgment over the sinner), not life (with its temptations and failures), not angelic powers (which might seem to have access to the divine councils), not things present (the current circumstances of difficulty), not things to come (the unknown future), not any other created thing, nothing in the entire created order can accomplish what only the divine decree could accomplish: the reversal of the love and the verdict that the divine Justifier has pronounced over those who are in Christ Jesus.

IV. Justification and the Feeling of Justification

The Objective Reality and Its Subjective Reception

A. The Crucial Distinction

One of the most practically important and most commonly misunderstood distinctions in the whole of the pastoral application of the doctrine of justification is the distinction between the objective reality of the justified standing and the subjective experience or feeling of that standing. Justification is an objective legal reality: it is the divine verdict, pronounced by the Judge of all the earth, grounded in the imputed righteousness of Christ, and permanent in its character. It is true independent of the believer's awareness of it, independent of the strength of her faith, independent of the quality of her present spiritual experience, and independent of the emotional state of her conscience. The verdict was pronounced; it stands; and it will stand regardless of whether the sinner who has received it feels justified on any given morning.

The feeling of justification, the subjective, experiential sense of peace with God, the conscious awareness of the no-condemnation of Romans 8:1, the felt confidence with which the believer approaches the throne of grace, is real, valuable, and the intended fruit of the doctrine in the believer's experience. But it is not the same thing as the justification itself, and the confusion of the two is the source of an enormous amount of pastoral damage. The believer who measures the reality of her justified standing by the strength of her felt peace is measuring it by the wrong instrument: the justified standing does not depend on the quality of the feeling, and the quality of the feeling does not determine the reality of the standing. Many genuinely justified believers feel condemned for extended periods, particularly during seasons of spiritual failure, depression, or the assaults of the enemy, and their felt condemnation does not change their real standing any more than a cloudy sky changes the reality of the sun.

The distinction between the reality and the feeling of justification is directly relevant to one of the most common pastoral situations the minister encounters: the person who says, “I know I am supposed to have peace with God, but I don’t feel it.” The pastoral response to this person is not to question the genuineness of their faith (the absence of the feeling does not indicate the absence of the reality), and not to encourage them to manufacture the feeling through more intense spiritual effort (feelings manufactured by effort are not the same as the peace that flows from a genuinely received reality). The pastoral response is to direct them firmly and specifically toward the objective reality, to say: the reality is there, whether you feel it or not; the verdict has been pronounced, whether your conscience is registering it or not; the no-condemnation is absolute, whether your experience is calm or troubled; and the task is not to produce the feeling but to receive the reality with the specific, Scripture-calibrated faith that trusts the divine declaration over the fluctuating testimony of the conscience.

B. 1 John 3:19–22 and the Reassurance of a Troubled Conscience

First John 3:19–22 provides the most direct New Testament address to the person whose conscience is troubled despite her genuine faith: “We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart and knows all things. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight” (NASB 1995). The verse is one of the most pastorally searching in the entire New Testament, and it is sometimes misread as a text about the conscience’s authority over the Christian life. In fact it is precisely the opposite: it is a text about God’s authority over the conscience.

The phrase “God is greater than our heart and knows all things” is the specific pastoral declaration for the person whose heart (the Johannine term for the conscience-bearing inner person) is condemning her. John is not saying: “If your heart condemns you, you must be right to worry.” He is saying: “Even when your heart condemns you, God is greater than your heart.” The divine verdict supersedes the conscience’s verdict. God’s knowledge of the situation is more comprehensive than the heart’s self-assessment: He knows the faith that is genuine even when the heart cannot identify it clearly; He knows the love that is present even when the heart cannot feel its consistency; and He knows the justified standing that is real even when the conscience is registering condemnation. The greatness of God over the condemning heart is the specific comfort for the believer whose conscience is more reliable as an accuser than as an assessor of her own spiritual state.

The pastoral use of 1 John 3:19–22 requires care and precision. It is not a text that encourages the dismissal of all conscience-accusations on the grounds that God is more lenient than the conscience. The context of 1 John establishes that genuine love for the brethren (v. 18: “let us not love with word or tongue, but in deed and truth”) is the ground on which the troubled heart can be assured. The assurance is not available to the person who has no genuine love for the brethren and whose conscience is correctly registering the absence of the evidences of regeneration; it is available to the person who is genuinely loving in deed and truth but whose heart is condemning her because it is calibrated by a standard more demanding than the gospel’s own. The pastoral judgment about which situation is present, the correctly-accusing conscience or the hyperactively-accusing conscience, requires both theological precision and pastoral wisdom.

V. Calibrating the Conscience by Scripture

When the Conscience Accuses, the Gospel Answers

A. *The Conscience as a Faculty Requiring Calibration*

The conscience is a real and God-given moral faculty: it is the interior capacity for self-assessment that the image of God implants in every human being, by which the person evaluates her own conduct against a standard and renders a verdict of guilt or innocence. The conscience is not infallible; it is a created faculty that has been distorted by the fall and requires the calibration of the Word of God to function accurately. A conscience calibrated exclusively by cultural norms will condemn some things that are not sinful and excuse some things that are. A conscience calibrated exclusively by the law's demands without the gospel's provisions will condemn without any path to relief. And a conscience that has been genuinely wounded by specific sins, especially those that have left lasting damage to relationships, reputation, or the person's own sense of identity, may continue to condemn long after the forgiveness has been fully received.

The calibration of the conscience by Scripture involves two simultaneous operations that must be held in tension without either overwhelming the other. The first is the law's work: the conscience must be calibrated to recognize genuine sin as genuinely sinful, to take seriously the specific violations of the divine standard that the law names, and to produce the appropriate grief and repentance (godly sorrow, as 2 Corinthians 7:10 establishes) when genuine sin has been committed. The conscience that is too easily pacified, that dismisses legitimate guilt with the reassurance that God is gracious before the genuine repentance has been rendered, is miscalibrated in the direction of antinomian laxity. The second is the gospel's work: the conscience must be calibrated to receive the full, specific, complete forgiveness that the gospel provides, so that it does not continue to condemn after the genuine repentance has been rendered and the specific forgiveness has been received. The conscience that continues to condemn after genuine repentance is miscalibrated in the direction of moralist hyperactivity.

The law-gospel distinction (developed in the Lutheran and Reformed traditions from Paul's own usage) is the framework within which the conscience is properly calibrated: the law does its work of conviction, producing the godly sorrow that leads to genuine repentance; the gospel does its work of liberation, producing the peace that flows from the received forgiveness and the no-condemnation of Romans 8:1. The pastor whose counsel always leans toward the law's work (always pressing conviction and repentance, rarely directing toward the gospel's relief) will produce scrupulous, anxiety-ridden souls whose consciences are perpetually in turmoil. The pastor whose counsel always leans toward the gospel's work (always directing toward grace, rarely pressing the law's legitimate demand for genuine repentance) will produce complacent souls whose consciences have been so thoroughly anesthetized that they no longer function as the God-given instrument for recognizing genuine sin. The skill of pastoral application is knowing which operation is needed in which specific pastoral situation, and applying it with the precision of one who knows both the law and the gospel deeply and loves the soul before her urgently.

B. *Luther's Tower Experience as the Paradigmatic Conscience-Liberation*

Martin Luther's account of his tower experience, the moment in the monastery at Wittenberg, probably between 1515 and 1519, when his understanding of "the righteousness of God" in Romans 1:17 was transformed from a terrifying attribute to a liberating provision, is the most famous and most personally resonant account of the conscience's liberation by the gospel in the history of the church. Luther's own retrospective account of the

experience deserves to be read in its full context: “I had greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, ‘the justice of God,’ because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage Him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against Him.

Luther continues: “Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that ‘the just shall live by his faith.’ Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.”

Luther’s account is the paradigmatic conscience-liberation because it identifies with surgical precision the specific distortion that afflicted his conscience and the specific biblical truth that corrected it. The distortion: “the righteousness of God” as the attribute by which God judges, the holiness that measures the sinner’s deficiency and pronounces the deserved condemnation. The correction: “the righteousness of God” as the righteousness God gives to the sinner through faith, the alien, imputed, freely given righteousness of Christ that replaces the sinner’s deficient record with the perfect record of the Son. The transformation of the conscience was not produced by any moral improvement on Luther’s part; it was produced by the specific, doctrinally precise correction of the specific misunderstanding of the specific biblical phrase that was the source of the specific terror. The conscience was terrorized by a lie about what “righteousness of God” meant; the correction of the lie by the truth produced the immediate, total, paradise-opening liberation.

The pastoral implication of Luther’s experience is that the liberation of the troubled conscience is not primarily a matter of emotional manipulation, spiritual discipline, or the accumulation of positive spiritual experiences that will outweigh the negative ones. It is primarily a matter of specific, doctrinally precise, biblically grounded correction of the specific misunderstanding that is producing the specific terror. Different troubled consciences are terrorized by different misunderstandings of the same gospel: some by the misunderstanding that God’s holiness requires a degree of moral purity that the believer’s sanctification has not yet produced; some by the misunderstanding that God’s forgiveness requires a quality of repentance that the believer’s repentance did not achieve; some by the misunderstanding that the guilt of specific past sins has been forgiven in principle but persists in the divine memory as a permanent complication of the relationship. Each misunderstanding requires a specific doctrinal correction, and the pastor who can identify the specific misunderstanding and apply the specific correction is doing exactly what Luther’s tower experience models: the liberation of the conscience by the precise application of the specific truth that the conscience’s distortion was preventing it from receiving.

VI. The Pastoral Balm

The Verdict Has Been Pronounced and Will Never Be Reversed

A. Hebrews 10:19–22 and the Confidence of Access

Hebrews 10:19–22 provides the New Testament’s most direct invitation to the person who has received the justified standing to live in the confident access that the standing provides: “Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (NASB 1995). Every element of the invitation is significant for the pastoral application of justification to the troubled conscience.

“Confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus”: the access to the divine presence is grounded in the blood of the atonement, not in the quality of the approaching soul’s own righteousness. The “confidence” (Greek: *parrēsia*, boldness, freedom of speech, the confidence of those who have the right of access) is the specific emotional register appropriate to the justified standing: not the dread of the condemned, not the cautious approach of the uncertain, but the bold, confident, free approach of those who know they have the right to be present, because the blood of Jesus has opened the way. “By a new and living way through the veil”: the veil of the Temple that separated the holy of holies from the rest of the sanctuary, the veil that was torn from top to bottom at the moment of Christ’s death (Matthew 27:51), is no longer a barrier. The way to the divine presence is open, permanently and fully, for all who approach through the blood of Christ.

“Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith”: the invitation is the direct, pastoral application of the objective standing to the subjective practice of approaching God. The “full assurance of faith” (Greek: *plērophoria pisteōs*) is the complete, undivided, fully-convinced confidence with which the approach to God is made, not the tentative, half-hoping, partially-doubting approach of one who is unsure of the welcome but the full assurance of one who knows that the standing is secure, the welcome is guaranteed, and the access is permanently open. “Having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience”: the “evil conscience” (ponera syneidēsis) is the guilty conscience, the conscience that is aware of the defilement of sin and knows itself to be unworthy of the divine presence. The sprinkling clean is the application of the blood of the atonement to the conscience, the specific, personal, assurance-producing reception of the forgiveness that the atonement has accomplished. The guilty conscience does not disqualify the approach; the blood of Jesus disqualifies the guilty conscience’s authority to prevent the approach.

B. The Specific Pastoral Declaration

The pastoral balm that the doctrine of justification provides for the troubled conscience can be stated with a specificity and a precision that no other pastoral approach can achieve. It is not the general encouragement of a God who is more patient than we think; it is the specific, legally grounded, personally directed declaration that the divine Judge of all the earth has pronounced the verdict of righteousness over the believing sinner, on the basis of the righteousness of His own eternal Son, and that verdict will never be reversed. The conscience may continue to accuse; the feelings may continue to fluctuate; the memory may continue to rehearse; and the accuser of the brethren may continue his ceaseless prosecution. But against all of these, the one answer is the one that Romans 8:33–34 gives: God is the one who justifies. And the God who justifies does not simultaneously condemn.

The specific content of the pastoral balm, addressed to the specific person in the specific situation of troubled conscience, must include at minimum these specific declarations, drawn from the specific texts this lesson has examined: (1) The peace with God that Romans 5:1 describes is yours, present tense, objective reality, grounded in the past declaration of the divine Judge and maintained by the permanence of the righteousness on which that

declaration rests. (2) The no-condemnation of Romans 8:1 is yours, comprehensive, categorical, addressed to the specific person in the specific situation, covering every item that the accusing conscience is rehearsing. (3) The love that Romans 8:35–39 declares to be inseparable from those in Christ is yours, nothing in heaven, earth, or hell can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus your Lord. (4) The access to the throne of grace that Hebrews 10:19–22 invites is yours, not tentatively, not conditionally, but in the bold confidence of those for whom the blood of Jesus has opened the way permanently.

The final word of this unit is the word that Luther heard in the tower, that Paul preached to the Romans, that the psalmist celebrated in Psalm 32 and Psalm 103, and that the whole of Unit 6 has been establishing with systematic theological precision: if you are in Christ, the Judge of the universe has pronounced His verdict over you, and it is “Not guilty, righteous in My sight.” Not conditionally, not provisionally, not pending your future moral performance. Definitively. Permanently. On the basis of the righteousness of the eternal Son, credited to your account through the gift of faith, grounded in the propitiation that satisfied the divine justice, pronounced by the divine Judge whose verdict admits no appeal and whose love for those in Christ admits no diminution. This is the peace that passes understanding. This is the pastoral balm of the justified soul. This is the gospel.

“Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ?”

Romans 8:33–35, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Peace with God	The objective status of reconciliation between the justified sinner and God, described in Romans 5:1 (“having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”). Distinguished from the subjective experience of emotional tranquility: peace with God is the legal and relational reality of the ended hostility between the sinner and the holy God (Romans 5:10 describes the pre-justified as “enemies”), not primarily a psychological state. The peace is present-tense, objective, and grounded in the completed past declaration of the justified standing rather than in the current quality of the believer’s spiritual experience. It is as permanent as the justification that produced it and as stable as the righteousness on which the justification rests.
No Condemnation	Romans 8:1’s categorical declaration that not one item of condemnation remains outstanding against those who are in Christ Jesus. The Greek <i>ouden katakrima</i> (literally “not one condemnation”) is the most absolute possible negation of every charge that the sinner’s record might have warranted. The no-condemnation is not a general divine amnesty (overlooking sin without addressing it) but the specific forensic consequence of the specific acts of propitiation and justification described in Romans 3–7: every specific charge has been specifically addressed and specifically discharged in the atoning death and resurrection of Christ. The no-condemnation is comprehensive (covering every sin of every believer), categorical (not partial or conditional), and permanent (grounded in the completed work of Christ rather than in the ongoing quality of the believer’s performance).
Conscience	The interior moral faculty by which the human person assesses her own conduct against a standard and renders a verdict of guilt or innocence. The conscience is a genuine God-given faculty (Romans 2:15: the Gentiles’ consciences bearing witness, their thoughts accusing or defending them) but is not infallible: it requires calibration by the Word of God to function accurately. An uncalibrated or miscalibrated conscience may accuse what the gospel has forgiven (the hyperactive conscience that continues to condemn after genuine repentance) or excuse what the law condemns (the seared conscience that has lost the capacity for appropriate moral self-assessment). Pastoral care of the conscience requires both the law’s work (calibrating the conscience to recognize genuine sin as sinful) and the gospel’s work (liberating the conscience from condemnation after genuine repentance).
Eirene	Greek: peace. Used in Romans 5:1 (“we have peace with God”) to describe the specific peace that justification produces, not merely the absence of conflict but the positive relational reconciliation between the justified sinner and God. The Hebrew equivalent (<i>shalom</i>) carries the fuller sense of wholeness, well-being, and rightness of relationship. The <i>eirene</i> of Romans 5:1 is both forensic (the legal end of the hostility that sin created between the sinner and the divine Judge) and relational (the beginning of the friendship with God that the enmity of sin had destroyed). It is experienced subjectively as the peace that passes understanding (Philippians 4:7) when the objective standing is consciously received and appropriated by faith.
Parrēsia	Greek: boldness, confidence, freedom of speech, the right of access. Used in Hebrews 10:19 (“since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus”) to describe the specific quality of approach appropriate to those whose access to the divine presence has been secured by the blood of the atonement. Parrēsia is the opposite of the dread and reticence appropriate to those under condemnation; it is the bold, free, confident approach of those who know they have the right to be present, a right established not by their own worthiness but by the blood of Jesus that permanently opens the way. The cultivation of parrēsia in prayer is the practical expression of the confidence that the justified standing provides.

Prosagōgē	Greek: access, introduction, the right of presentation before a king or a superior. Used in Romans 5:2 (“through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand”) to describe the specific dimension of the peace with God that the justified standing produces: the permanent right of access to the divine presence, the ability to approach God at any time with the confidence of those who have been declared righteous in His sight. The word was used in the Greco-Roman world for the formal introduction of one person to a person of higher rank, the act of being brought into the presence of a superior by an authorized intermediary. Christ is the prosagōgē through whom the justified sinner is permanently introduced into the presence of the holy God.
Evil Conscience	The guilty conscience, the conscience burdened with the awareness of sin and its defilement, described in Hebrews 10:22 as the specific spiritual condition that the blood of Jesus sprinkles clean. The evil conscience (Greek: ponerā syneidēsis) is not an evil in the sense of a morally defective conscience but a conscience that is accurately registering the genuine defilement of sin and knows itself to be unworthy of the divine presence. The gospel’s provision for the evil conscience is not a general reassurance that God is tolerant but the specific, blood-applied cleansing of the specific defilement that the conscience is registering. The sprinkling of the heart clean from an evil conscience (Hebrews 10:22) is the New Covenant fulfillment of Ezekiel 36:25’s promise of cleansing water.
Tower Experience	Luther’s account of the transformative moment (probably 1515–1519) in the Wittenberg monastery tower when his understanding of “the righteousness of God” in Romans 1:17 was transformed from a terrifying divine attribute (by which God judges sinners) to a liberating divine provision (the righteousness given to sinners through faith). Luther’s description: “I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.” The tower experience is the paradigmatic account of conscience-liberation by the gospel: a specific doctrinal misunderstanding producing a specific spiritual terror, corrected by the specific exegetical insight into the specific biblical phrase, producing the immediate, total liberation of the previously enslaved conscience. The pastoral lesson: conscience-liberation is achieved not primarily by emotional manipulation or spiritual discipline but by specific, doctrinally precise correction of specific theological misunderstandings.
Plērophoria Pisteōs	Greek: “full assurance of faith”, the complete, undivided, fully-convinced confidence with which the justified believer is invited to approach God, described in Hebrews 10:22 (“let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith”). Contrasted with the tentative, partially-doubting, uncertain approach of one who is unsure of the welcome. The plērophoria is grounded not in the quality of the approaching soul’s own faith (which is often weak and uncertain) but in the objective ground of the approach: the blood of Jesus that has permanently opened the way to the divine presence. The cultivation of full assurance is not the achievement of a subjective emotional state but the progressive, Scripture-calibrated reception of the objective ground of the approach into the conscious confidence of the approaching soul.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that justification is an objective legal reality that is true whether we feel it or not. This is perhaps the single most practically important doctrinal conviction for the believer who struggles with a troubled conscience: the reality does not depend on the feeling, and the absence of the feeling does not indicate the absence of the reality. The peace with God of Romans 5:1 is present tense, declarative, grounded in a past completed act, and it is true on the mornings when the conscience is calm and on the mornings when it is turbulent. The no-condemnation of Romans 8:1 covers the days of spiritual flourishing and the days of spiritual failure with equal comprehensiveness. The believer who has understood this distinction has the single most important piece of pastoral equipment available for navigating the storms of the conscience: the compass of the objective reality that the subjective experience cannot override.

We must believe that God is greater than our heart, as 1 John 3:20 declares. The condemning conscience is not the final authority on the believer's standing before God; God is. The conscience is a God-given faculty that requires calibration by Scripture; it is not an infallible revealer of the divine assessment of the soul's condition. The believer who has been genuinely repentant and has genuinely received the forgiveness that the gospel provides but whose conscience continues to condemn is a believer whose conscience is miscalibrated, operating on a standard more demanding than the gospel's own. The correction is not to silence the conscience but to calibrate it to the specific, complete, permanent forgiveness that the gospel offers, so that it renders verdicts consistent with the divine Judge's own declared verdict: not guilty, righteous in My sight.

We must believe that the inseparability of the love of God from those in Christ (Romans 8:35–39) is as comprehensive as Paul's list of potential separating forces suggests: death, life, angels, principalities, things present, things to come, powers, height, depth, any other created thing. None of these can separate the justified believer from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, which means that the feelings of spiritual distance, the seasons of apparent divine silence, the experiences of suffering and difficulty and the accuser's most vigorous prosecution, are not evidence of a broken connection. The love persists; the standing persists; the verdict persists. We must believe this with the specific, warfare-tested, suffering-enduring conviction that the inseparability claim deserves.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The emotional register that the doctrine of justification's application to the conscience should produce is the specific relief of a person who has been standing under a burden they did not need to bear and has just put it down. The burden of the self-justifying conscience, the perpetual management of the divine assessment through the quality of the spiritual performance, the anxiety of not knowing whether today's devotional life was adequate, the dread of approaching a God whose verdict is perpetually uncertain, is a burden that the gospel has removed, definitively and permanently, by the specific declaration of the justified standing. The relief is not the relief of moral license; it is the relief of the person who has understood that the burden was never required, that the management was always unnecessary, and that the ground of the standing has been established by Another whose righteousness is as perfect and as permanent as His eternal life.

Desire the full assurance of faith that Hebrews 10:22 invites: the bold, confident, *parrësia*-quality approach to the throne of grace that is appropriate for those whose access has been secured by the blood of Jesus. Not the tentative approach of one who is hoping she has done enough to be welcome, but the free, confident, full-assurance approach of one who knows that the welcome is guaranteed by the blood of the eternal Son that opened the way. Desire this not as an emotional achievement but as the progressive, Scripture-calibrated reception of the objective reality into the daily experience of prayer and worship. The full assurance is available; the blood has opened the way; the great high priest is interceding; and the invitation of Hebrews 10:22 is the specific, named, biblically authorized invitation to approach with the confidence the standing warrants.

Desire the specific capacity for pastoral care of the troubled conscience that this lesson equips you to offer. The person in your congregation who is living under the chronic burden of a condemning conscience, whose assurance is perpetually uncertain, whose approach to God is perpetually timid, whose guilt is perpetually fresh despite genuine repentance and genuine faith, needs from you the specific, doctrinally precise, personally directed pastoral word that the doctrine of justification provides. Desire to be able to give that word with the specificity it deserves and the warmth the situation requires: not a lecture on the theology of justification, but the specific, personal, lovingly applied declaration: the verdict has been pronounced over you, and it is not guilty; the love that Romans 8:35–39 describes is yours and cannot be separated from you; and the peace of Romans 5:1 is yours this moment, whether you feel it or not.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read Romans 8:1–2, 31–39 slowly and meditatively, pausing at each major declaration to receive it as the specific address of the divine Judge to your specific conscience. At each point, identify what specific accusation of your own conscience the declaration addresses. For “there is now no condemnation” (v. 1): what specific item of condemnation is your conscience currently rehearsing? Name it specifically. Then receive the no-condemnation as the specific answer to the specific charge: not one item. For “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies” (v. 33): who is the specific accuser most active in your conscience at this time (the memory of a past failure, the sense of insufficient spiritual performance, the residue of a specific sin)? Name it. Then receive the “God is the one who justifies” as the specific silencing of the specific accuser.
- Practice the Hebrews 10:19–22 approach as a daily discipline of prayer for one month. Each morning, before you begin your prayers, read verses 19–22 aloud as the declaration of the ground on which you are approaching. Note: “I have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus.” Name the specific thing in your conscience that might otherwise produce dread or hesitancy in the approach. Then receive the “confidence by the blood of Jesus” as the specific answer to the specific dread: the blood has opened the way; the access is guaranteed; the great high priest is present; and you are invited to draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith. Report to your study group at the month’s end what effect the discipline had on the quality and the confidence of your daily prayer.
- Identify the specific misunderstanding that is producing the specific terror in your own spiritual experience, the specific error about the gospel that your conscience is operating on when it accuses most powerfully. Is it the misunderstanding that God’s forgiveness requires a quality of repentance that you have never achieved? Is it the misunderstanding that the forgiveness of specific past sins has left a permanent complication in the relationship? Is it the misunderstanding that the quality of your current sanctification determines the quality of your justified standing? Name the specific misunderstanding. Then identify the specific biblical truth that corrects it, the specific verse, the specific Pauline declaration, the specific promise,

and commit it to memory as the specific correction for the specific error. This is what Luther found in the tower: a specific correction of a specific error producing a specific liberation.

- Prepare a pastoral letter, not to be sent, but as a spiritual exercise, addressed to a specific person in your congregation or pastoral circle who is living under the burden of a troubled conscience. The letter should include: (a) the honest acknowledgment of what the troubled conscience is experiencing (the specific guilt, the specific accusation, the specific sense of unworthiness); (b) the distinction between the objective reality of the justified standing and the subjective experience of the condemnation (the reality is true whether you feel it or not); (c) the specific, named declarations of Romans 5:1, Romans 8:1, and Romans 8:33–34 as the divine Judge’s own answer to the specific accusations of the conscience; and (d) the invitation to draw near with boldness to the throne of grace as one for whom the access has been permanently secured by the blood of Jesus.
- Memorize and meditate on Psalm 103:8–12 as the Old Testament’s fullest portrait of the divine disposition toward the penitent sinner who has received forgiveness: “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (NASB 1995). Receive the east-west metaphor as the specific pastoral address to the conscience that is rehearsing the sins that God has removed to the infinite distance. Write out the specific sin that your conscience most persistently rehearses, and then write below it: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed this from me.”

Key Texts: *Romans 5:1–2; 8:1, 31–39; Hebrews 10:19–22; 1 John 3:19–22; Psalm 32:1–2; 103:8–12; Philippians 4:7; Revelation 12:10–11; Isaiah 1:18*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- This lesson opens with the observation that many genuinely believing Christians know the doctrine of justification but do not live in the peace it promises, that the conscience continues to accuse, the guilty sense of divine disapproval persists, and the approach to God in prayer carries the dread of the unworthy rather than the confidence of the justified. Does this description match your own experience, or the experience of people in your pastoral care? What specific factors, in theology, in temperament, in past spiritual experience, in the preaching and teaching you have received, contribute to the gap between knowing the doctrine and inhabiting the peace? And what do you hope to receive from this lesson that would help close that gap?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Romans 5:1–2. In verse 1, what is the grammatical form of “having been justified” (perfect passive participle, what does this tense indicate about the timing and ongoing result of the justification)? What does “we have peace” (present indicative) establish about the present availability of the peace, is it a future hope or a present reality? In verse 2, what three dimensions of the peace’s fullness are described (“we have obtained our introduction into...”; “the grace in which we stand”; “we exult in hope of...”)? And what does the specific phrase “through our Lord Jesus Christ” at the end of verse 1 add to the account of the peace?
- Read Romans 8:1 carefully. What are the two Greek words for “no condemnation” (ouden katakrima), and what does each contribute to the force of the declaration? What is the temporal marker (“now”, Greek nun) and what eschatological significance does it carry? What is the specific qualifier that defines the beneficiaries (“for those who are...”)? And how does the broader context of Romans 7:14–25 (the distressed cry of the person who does the very thing she hates) illuminate the specific pastoral situation that Romans 8:1’s declaration is addressing?
- Read Romans 8:31–39. What is the logical structure of the passage, how does verse 31’s “if God is for us” set up the argument? In verse 32, what is the a fortiori argument Paul makes (from the greater gift already given to the lesser gifts not yet given)? In verses 33–34, what three rhetorical questions are asked, and what is the specific answer Paul gives to each? In verses 35–39, what is the catalogue of potential separating forces, and what is the specific answer Paul gives at the end (“nor any other created thing will be able to...”)? And what does the final phrase “the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” establish about the specific ground of the inseparability?
- Read Hebrews 10:19–22. What three grounds for drawing near are given (“since we have confidence... since we have a great priest... our hearts sprinkled clean...”)? What specific vocabulary does the author use for the quality of the approach (“with a sincere heart in full assurance of...”)? What is the specific image of verse 20 (“a new and living way through the veil, that is, His flesh”) and what does the reference to the torn veil establish about the access to the divine presence? And what is the specific description of the conscience in verse 22 (“our hearts sprinkled clean from an... conscience”) and what does the image of sprinkling clean suggest about the application of the atonement to the conscience?
- Read 1 John 3:18–22. What specific form of love does verse 18 command (“not with word or tongue, but in deed and...”)? In verses 19–20, what is the specific pastoral word for the person whose heart condemns her (“God is greater than our heart and...”)? What does this declaration establish about the relative authority

of the conscience versus the divine verdict? In verses 21–22, what is the condition described for having “confidence before God” (“if our heart does not condemn us”), and how does this relate to the verses about the condemning heart? Is verse 21 the ideal case (when the conscience is not condemning) and verses 19–20 the pastoral case (when it is)?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson makes the crucial distinction between justification (an objective legal reality) and the feeling of justification (a subjective experiential state). Evaluate the theological and pastoral adequacy of this distinction. Is it theologically accurate to describe justification as objective and independent of the believer’s awareness of it? Does the New Testament ever present justification as something that needs to be subjectively received or personally appropriated (and if so, how does that relate to the objective character of the declaration)? And what specific pastoral danger exists on each side of the objective/subjective distinction, if the objective is overemphasized (reducing justification to a legal fact disconnected from experience) or the subjective is overemphasized (making the justified standing dependent on the quality of the felt peace)?
- The lesson presents 1 John 3:20’s “God is greater than our heart” as the specific pastoral declaration for the person whose conscience is condemning her despite genuine faith. Evaluate this interpretation in context. How does the broader argument of 1 John 3:18–22, specifically, the call to love “in deed and truth” (v. 18) as the ground of the heart’s assurance (v. 19), define the specific situation in which “God is greater than our heart” is the appropriate pastoral word? Is it the appropriate word for every troubled conscience, or specifically for the conscience that is condemning itself despite genuine love, and how does the pastor distinguish between the two?
- The lesson presents Luther’s tower experience as the paradigmatic account of conscience-liberation by the gospel. Evaluate the transferability of this account as a pastoral model. Luther’s liberation came from the specific exegetical correction of a specific theological misunderstanding of a specific biblical phrase. Is this model adequate for all forms of the troubled conscience, or are there forms of conscience-trouble that require different pastoral approaches (for example, the person whose guilt is less about theological misunderstanding and more about deep personal shame, or the person whose conscience is troubled by grief rather than theological error)? What dimensions of the pastoral care of the troubled conscience does Luther’s model not adequately address?
- The lesson presents Romans 8:35–39’s catalogue of non-separating forces as the comprehensive assurance that no circumstance, spiritual power, or created thing can break the connection between the justified believer and the love of God in Christ. How does this passage address the specific pastoral situation of the person who is suffering and interprets her suffering as evidence that God has withdrawn from her or is punishing her? What does Romans 8:36’s citation of Psalm 44:22 (“For Your sake we are being put to death all day long”) add to the argument, how does the fact that Paul quotes a psalm of apparent divine abandonment as evidence of the love that cannot separate clarify the relationship between suffering and the divine love?
- The lesson identifies the “law-gospel distinction” as the framework within which the conscience is properly calibrated. Evaluate the adequacy of this framework for pastoral care of the troubled conscience. What specific pastoral situations does the law-gospel distinction address well? What specific pastoral situations might it not address as well, for example, the person whose conscience is troubled not primarily by guilt but by shame (a different psychological register), or the person whose conscience is troubled by grief rather

than by moral self-condemnation? How would the pastoral application of the doctrine of justification need to be adapted for each of these different forms of conscience-trouble?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson describes the person who “measures the reality of the justified standing by the strength of the felt peace” as “measuring it by the wrong instrument.” Is this an accurate description of how you typically assess your own standing before God, do you use the quality of the felt peace as the instrument for measuring the reality of the standing? If so, what specific changes in your daily spiritual practice would reflect the lesson’s correction: grounding the assessment of the standing in the objective reality of the divine declaration rather than in the subjective quality of the experienced peace? And how would this change affect the quality of your approach to God in prayer?
- The lesson’s account of Luther’s tower experience suggests that conscience-liberation is produced by the specific, doctrinally precise correction of specific theological misunderstandings. Identify the two or three specific theological misunderstandings about the gospel that are most active in producing the troubled conscience in your own experience or in the experience of those in your pastoral care. For each misunderstanding: (a) what is the specific false belief about God, about forgiveness, or about the justified standing? (b) What is the specific biblical truth that corrects it? And (c) what is the specific text you would use to bring that correction to bear on the person whose conscience is being troubled by that specific misunderstanding?
- The lesson describes the pastoral care of the troubled conscience as requiring “both the law’s work (calibrating the conscience to recognize genuine sin as sinful) and the gospel’s work (liberating the conscience from condemnation after genuine repentance).” Think of a specific pastoral situation, real or hypothetical, in which you would need to apply primarily the law’s work to a person’s troubled conscience (their conscience is not troubled enough, or is troubled by the wrong things). Then think of a specific pastoral situation in which you would need to apply primarily the gospel’s work (their conscience is too troubled, continuing to condemn after genuine repentance). What specific distinguishing features of the person’s situation would help you identify which of the two is needed? And what specific pastoral words would you use in each case?
- Romans 8:35–39’s declaration of the inseparability of the believer from the love of God in Christ is addressed not to Christians in comfortable circumstances but to those who are experiencing tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword. Think of a specific person in your pastoral care who is experiencing severe suffering and whose suffering is producing doubt about the divine love and the justified standing. How would you use Romans 8:35–39, specifically, including the Psalm 44:22 citation of verse 36, to address that person’s specific doubt? And how would you avoid the pastoral error of using the doctrine of justification to minimize or dismiss the reality of the suffering, rather than to sustain and ground the person within it?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's prayer time by reading Psalm 103:1–14 slowly and meditatively, the Old Testament's fullest portrait of the divine disposition toward those who are His, with special attention to verses 8–12. Read it as the voice of the same God who speaks in Romans 5:1 and Romans 8:1 and Romans 8:33–34, the same divine character, the same compassion and grace, the same slowness to anger, the same lovingkindness. Let verse 12 do its specific work in your conscience: "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." Name the specific transgressions that your conscience is rehearsing. Then receive the east-west metaphor as the specific divine declaration about those specific transgressions: removed, infinitely, irreversibly, completely. They are not in the divine memory as unresolved complications of the relationship; they are removed to the infinite distance, charged to Christ's account, borne at the cross, and gone.

Pray Romans 8:1 as a personal declaration over every specific item of condemnation that your conscience is currently registering. Not as a formula to be mechanically repeated, but as the specific, doctrinally grounded, personally applied answer to the specific charge. Name each charge honestly: this specific failure, this specific pattern of sin, this specific past action that the memory returns to with particular weight. And then declare over each specific charge, with the full authority of the inspired Word: "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Not one item. Not this item. Not any item. The no-condemnation is as comprehensive as the list you have just named, and as specific as each item on it.

Pray Romans 8:31–39 as a responsive declaration, posing the questions and answering them in the first person. "What then shall I say to these things?" I say: if God is for me, who is against me? "Who will bring a charge against God's elect?" God is the one who justifies; no charge stands. "Who is the one who condemns?" Christ Jesus is He who died, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who intercedes for me. "Who will separate me from the love of Christ?" Nothing in heaven, earth, or hell, not death, not life, not the accuser, not the failures of this week or any week, not the silence of this season or any season, not the height of my best days or the depth of my worst ones. Nothing. Nothing in all of creation. The love of God in Christ Jesus my Lord will not be separated from me.

Pray for those in your congregation whose consciences are most burdened, whose guilt is most persistent, whose assurance is most fragile, whose approach to God is most tentative. You know who they are. Pray for them by name, asking the Spirit to do in their consciences what He did in Luther's: to bring the specific, precise, personally applied truth of justification to bear on the specific, named misunderstanding that is producing the specific terror. Ask for the specific pastoral wisdom to be the instrument of that work in their lives, to know when to apply the law's work (calibrating the conscience to recognize genuine sin) and when to apply the gospel's work (liberating the conscience from condemnation after genuine repentance). Ask for the courage to give the specific word when the specific word is needed, and the warmth to give it as one who loves the person to whom it is given.

Close with Hebrews 10:19–22 as the corporate invitation to approach God with the full assurance of faith that this unit's doctrine has been establishing: "Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience." Draw near. Now. Together. With the full assurance that the blood of Jesus warrants, the great high priest's intercession maintains, and the justified standing,

declared, permanent, irrevocable, grounded in the alien righteousness of the eternal Son, makes the most appropriate possible posture for those who are in Christ Jesus.

“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.”

Romans 5:1–2, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Romans 5:1–2; 8:1, 31–39; Hebrews 10:19–22; 1 John 3:18–22; Psalm 32:1–2; 103:1–14; Philippians 4:7; Romans 1:17

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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