

Keeping the Gospel on the Throne of Conscience

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Our Text, Colossians 3:15, sets forth Christ as the bestower of peace to His people. “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful” (Col 3:15). We have this peace by reason of our union with Him. This peace is intended to garrison the hearts of believers (Phil 4:7) from fear, anxiety, and sinful passions. That peace is *ruling* as we rest in our contentment in Christ; enjoying His forgiveness and His promise that nothing can separate us from His love. This peace rules us as we trust Christ’s lordship in providence—that in His power, love, and wisdom, He overrules all things for His glory and the good of His people (Rom 8:28).

Now the fact that this peace has a social dimension is clear from the context of our verse: “you were called in one body.” Love and peace form the bond of unity in the body of Christ, the church, consciously preserving that peace, is to characterize our relations (Eph 4:1-3).

This means that peace must be allowed to bridle sinful passions and affections so that contentions, quarrels, grudges, resentments, offenses bow before that peace—Christ’s peace is to rule as king in the believer’s life. This is essential in order to promote spiritual oneness. Now it goes without saying that this peace is contested internally in our lives. Conflicts arise within us—internal motives, impulses, and reasonings threaten to disturb the reign of peace. It is at these junctures that we must obey the burden of our text by allowing the peace of Christ to step in, decide, and prevail. The idea which is contained in the verb “rule” here is that of an umpire *making the call* (Grk, *brabuoeto*, to referee, call a decision). When there is a conflict in motives that threatens to destroy harmony, the believer must allow the peace of Christ to be the arbiter in order to avoid discord.

The divine logic in this injunction reasons as follow: the peace which Christ has won for His people is designed to translate into peace and unity in the body of Christ. But, in order for this bond of peace to be enjoyed by the Lord’s people corporately, each member must stay close to Christ who is the source of that peace. We all know by experience what the opposite of that is. When out of fellowship with the Lord we are more prone to engage in gossip, slander, anger, and bitterness.

Every true believer knows what a continual battle it is to ‘labor to enter His rest’—our ‘sabbath rest’ in Christ (Heb 4:11). It is no small effort to consistently enjoy gospel rest in Christ and to make the ‘verdict’ of heaven at Calvary the verdict of one’s conscience. Everything seems to war against the heavenly verdict of “it is finished”—*the world, the flesh, the devil*, do, even *religion*. Each of these ‘pseudo-sources’ of peace urges us to rely upon either personal performance, comparison with others, or escapism as the ground and basis for quieting the conscience.

The conscience is a tireless researcher, always collecting evidence of our moral failures and shortcomings. The conscience looks into the smallest details of a person’s life, examining motives and intents of the heart—and, frequently accusing the individual of transgressions in the thought life (Rom 2:15). Our great temptation amidst our multiplicity of failings is to approach the ‘bookkeeping’ of conscience by means of law. In the law approach to conscience-management, the individual argues for peace of conscience from the vantage point of personal strengths and performance—as if achievements have the power to outweigh demerits. So engrained in us is the attempt to quiet the

conscience by means of law, one may accurately say that law is the *religion we were born with*. It comes natural to us. We are all self-justifiers by nature (**Luke 10:29; 16:15**).

In the law approach to conscience management, we function like the Pharisees of old who “cooked the books of conscience.” In other words the Pharisees ‘bribed’ their consciences by selecting things they were good at, and then using those isolated areas of outward achievement as their overall ethical ‘scorecard’. This bribery of conscience is not unique—it is the human condition due to the fall. Whether your area of achievement is finance, charity, congeniality, theology, health, outward morality, sports, parenting, or community service—each of us is tempted to make our area of achievement our scorecard to offset the accusations of conscience. It’s like the boy who had filled the side of a barn with arrows he had shot. Each arrow had its own target and each arrow was in the bull’s eye of its target. The amazed farmer asked the boy how he had achieved such a feat of hitting the center of each bullseye. The boy answered, “Easy, I shoot the arrow first and then draw the target around the arrow.”

That’s a perfect illustration of trying to manage the conscience by law. We discover what we are good at, then we ‘draw the target around it’ as if our isolated little standard is the same as God’s universal standard. No wonder Jesus called the Pharisees hypocrites. Jesus said to them, “*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You tithe mint and dill and cummin, but have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel (Mt 23:23-24)*. Jesus likens their narrow little bandwidth of obedience to *straining at a gnat while swallowing a camel (v. 24)*. They picked something humanly achievable, then made that the metric to score their religious devotion. The religious leaders of Jesus’ day treated their practice of selective, outward obedience as ‘normal’, but Jesus ridicules it as pseudo-obedience.

Attempting to manage the conscience by law is futile because it always involves a radical departure from universal obedience (all areas of life commanded by God), and a radical dumbing down of God’s requirements (Rom 10:1-4). When law is on the throne of conscience in place of the gospel, there is an accompanying ‘lowering of the market’ in regards to God’s requirements. In other words, the bar is lowered to the level of what the flesh is capable of—this is a patent refusal to submit to God’s righteousness (**Rom 10:3**). It is an attempt to placate the conscience and offset guilt by appealing to the moral value of things that are humanly achievable.

All false religion incorporates the management of conscience by law. People speak false peace to their consciences, then they take it to the next step. They tell themselves that because they have been successful at muzzling their consciences, therefore, they have also been successful at protecting themselves from God’s judgment. But this is a cruel deception. A day is coming when the conscience will operate in perfect synchrony with God’s holy standards.

How terrifying it will be on judgment day when the lost individual discovers to his horror that he can no longer bribe his conscience. The ability to muffle the conscience will be absent. On that terrible day, God’s law, God’s verdict of damnation, and the sinner’s conscience will all be in perfect agreement. In other words, when the lost person stands before the Lord, the conscience will no longer accept bribes or alibis. The ability to justify self through excuses and rationalizations will be altogether gone (**Rev 20:11-15**). Every mouth will be closed (**Rom 3:19**). On that day the conscience of the unbeliever will rise up to its full moral stature and begin to take its eternal revenge by

unceasingly condemning its ungrateful host. How we as believers need the gospel continually applied to the conscience. True believers must not slip back into the patterns of self-justification that are so indigenous to our natures. The gospel must remain enthroned in conscience, for the gospel alone gives us the courage to live a lifestyle of repentance; facing our sin so that we might confess it and forsake it.

It is remarkable just how many hours of the day our conscience speaks. Romans 2:15 describes the conscience as ‘weighing-in’ on every ethical decision we make, no matter how small. God’s perfect law is written on our hearts (consciences) in a rudimentary fashion, and since we continually fall short of His moral requirements, we hear from our conscience quite frequently. Therefore, we carry the memory of untold 1000’s of moral failures. An accusing conscience, polluted and defiled by sin is a universal experience in Adam’s fallen race.

It reminds me of the spray-painted words on a highway overpass in Britain, “Jesus is the answer.” One motorist, after seeing those words every week day for a year during his commute, noticed that someone had written under those words, “What’s the question?” The Bible-believing Christian knows exactly what the ‘question’ is—the question concerns the sinner’s dilemma: “*What is the answer to a misery-producing conscience, and impending death and condemnation?*” We rejoice that the gospel proclaims Jesus as the answer; for He has satisfied the unbending justice of God on behalf of all who believe. His blood fully cleanses the conscience: “How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God (**Heb 9:14**)? The true believer rejoices in the truth that only that which ultimately satisfies God’s justice can satisfy the conscience of man. That is our perfect hope—that God in Christ has perfectly satisfied His own justice for all who believe—“By one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (**Heb 10:14**).

When Paul gives a condensed version of his personal testimony of salvation in Philippians 3:3-14, he sets into sharp contrast the false hope of gaining righteousness before God by law-keeping against the true hope of God-given righteousness that comes by faith in Christ (3:9). The vital point that Paul is making is missed by so many—namely that in order to have righteousness by Christ alone, one must repudiate and abandon all reliance upon false sources of righteousness. There can be no admixture of ‘*Christ our righteousness*’ with a spurious source of righteousness.

But church history and our own experience reveal that it is not an easy thing to stay free and stand firm in Christ alone (Gal 5:1ff.). Like the Galatians of old, we tend to move away from rest in Christ toward performance-based models of Christian living. Our lower nature has a kind of ‘lust for law’ that makes us hungry for personally accumulated merit. We are inveterate ‘merit-mongers’—always wanting to take every achievement, every virtue, and every personal exponent, and plow it into our boundless need to shore-up our self-concept. But, this principle of personal value and exoneration by means of relying on our works is *a two-edged sword*. Here’s the reason why: the same law that permits me to take credit for my achievements becomes a ruthless accuser when I fail. God be praised that the gospel is the ‘medicine’ applied by Christ, our Great Physician. Let’s examine further how the gospel deals with our predilection for merit collecting.

The cross of Christ pierces our ego-driven, self-justifying motivations. The cross always brings us back to the freeness of God in bestowing grace—and, the cross takes us back to our utter inability to obligate God (Rom 11:33-36). When we feed on the truth of the cross, it keeps us in a posture of dependency—and for good reason, ongoing faith in Christ involves repeatedly consenting to have

Christ labor for us, in our place, as our Substitute—so that God can be infinitely kind to us for Christ’s sake—not our sake. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (**Mk 10:45**). The gospel enthroned in conscience (calling the shots, ‘making the call’ like an umpire) keeps us in that frame of mind wherein we continually *consent* to have Christ represent us. I have chosen the word “consent” because, like the apostle Peter, we must *consent* against our inner resistance to have Christ stoop so low as to wash the filth from our person.

“Consent” is a fitting word to describe faith’s submission to Christ. It describes how faith desists from self, renouncing self as a source, and turning wholly to Christ for our acceptance and peace with God. This issue of *consent* is why the gospel is so counterintuitive. It goes against all of our natural instincts concerning the source of our security, significance, lovability, acceptance. In our carnal reasoning, we demand to carry these things ourselves. But, by His sovereign grace God has brought us to Himself through Christ, and it is in Christ alone that we stand (**Rom 5:1-2**). Therefore, our entire status before the Father is upheld by Christ, and rests upon Him.

Christ not only holds us up, He holds up the reputation of the Godhead in our salvation. In other words, the gospel of Jesus Christ reveals God’s righteousness. God’s righteousness is put on display in Christ’s atoning work for His people (**Rom 1:16, 17; 3 24-26**). Thus, in the gospel we discover that God makes His own righteousness the cause of our salvation. God’s righteousness, freely credited to us in Christ, places the believing sinner in right relation with the holy God of the universe. We can never outgrow our need for the gospel—it is our daily ‘food’—and in it the glory of God is revealed in the face of Christ (**2 Cor 4:4-6**). The good news of our relationship with God is forever settled in Christ. “My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink” (**Jn 6:55**).

Since the gospel goes against all of our religious instincts and habits of self-defense and conscience-bribing, it involves is a ‘spiritual discipline’ to keep the gospel enthroned in the conscience. Authors who have written on this spiritual discipline sometimes refer to it as: “preaching the gospel to one’s self” (see, Luther on Galatians, Walter Marshall, John Owen, Jeremiah Burroughs, Jack Miller, Jerry Bridges, et al). The *peace of Christ*, the *word of Christ*, and the *Word of His grace* are all synonyms for the gospel. Gospel-based Christian living is of course the N.T. model of sanctification, communion, and service (see Walter Marshall, *Gospel Mystery of Sanctification*).

When Paul exhorts his readers to, “let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts” (**Col 3:15**), he wants his readers to have the gospel reigning in their consciences as the uncontested regent. But, as we can attest, there is daily opposition and resistance to the *reign* of the gospel. Think how many circumstances and emotions try to ‘kick down’ the door of peace in our hearts each day!

Only when the gospel is enthroned, and allowed to rule and reign in the conscience is it able to consistently speak peace. When the gospel is allowed to ‘rule’, it functions like an umpire; it *makes the call* as the final arbiter—having the ‘last word’. As such the gospel enthroned puts an end to all internal disputes (though not usually without a fight!). The gospel is able to overrule all other verdicts of conscience. The gospel prevents life’s vicissitudes from kicking down the door of peace.

Our problem is that we tire of not measuring up. In our own strength we want to go to war against the inner voice of condemnation and inadequacy. We want to show that we can measure up if given a fighting chance. We have something to prove as evidenced by the first inklings of pride rising up in us. Alas, we become weary of grace, we want to move past being God’s object of pity and

sovereign mercy, and so we grab the reins, hitch ourselves to law, and demand that we carry our own worth and righteousness through our performance.

As fallen creatures, managing conscience by law is our default position. In fact, since the conscience is wired for strict justice, it is suspicious of mercy and compassion! It is like a relentless private eye that collects dirt on us. It builds a case against us, and then rushes to judgment demanding a verdict. This is why the conscience needs to be constantly informed by the gospel. The conscience of the believer needs to be continually ‘educated’ by the gospel. For, the conscience is a very zealous ‘justice mechanism’—therefore, the believer must frequently behold by faith the historic gospel fact that real justice has been accomplished against his sins in the offering of Christ (**1 Jn 4:10**). .

When the gospel is enthroned in the conscience, it keeps Christ in view as the One offered by the Father for all my transgressions. The gospel enthroned makes the knowledge of Christ to be ‘3-D’ to the eye of faith—for the gospel displays Christ as the sum total of all that the Father is toward me. The gospel exhibits Christ as ‘Source Person’—of *life, light, love, righteousness, and belonging*. This is why the gospel alone possesses the power to take me off of the treadmill of self-consciousness, and self-performance—for it lifts me off of self-reliance and leverages me upon Christ my peace.

The actions of resting, leaning, and trusting Christ are not only exercised for forgiveness and eternal life. According to the **Galatians 2:20**, Christ is expressing His life through the believer. That means that the gospel exhibits Christ as our very life now (**Col 3:3-5; Jn 15:5; Gal 5:25; 1 Jn 4:9**). Thus, the gospel is not merely our entrance into the Christian life, the gospel opens up the doctrine of the *exchanged life*—Christ’s life now—in power and love *exchanged* for my weakness and selfishness. Thus, the issue is; how can I get out of the way so that Christ can exchange His life for mine and live His life through me? How may I reach that point where I can say along with Paul, “It is no longer I who live; but Christ lives in me’ (**Gal 2:20**)?” The answer turns upon reckoning our union with Christ.

At the moment of salvation, the Spirit of God brings the sinner into union with the Lord so that all of the benefits of Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and intercession were applied to the believer. Our entrance into Christianity was accomplished when God the Holy Spirit united us with Christ—at the point of the ‘effectual call’, Christ’s finished work was applied, bringing life to us (**1 Cor 12:13; Rom 6:3-7**). The only reason I am a saved sinner is because Christ *exchanged* His life for mine at Calvary—that is the heart of the gospel. The reality of Christ having taken our place at Calvary is set forth in all its grace and power in **2 Corinthians 5:21**. “And He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

Believers rightly regard this exchange to be their salvation. But, most believers do not daily base their Christian walk and new identity upon this exchange. According to the apostle Paul, believers should be constantly reckoning this *exchange* (**Rom 6:11; Gal 2:20; Col 3:5**). The pivotal truth is that the *exchange* is not only our *entrance* into the Christian life, but also the *source* of the Christian life. “God sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him (**1 Jn 4:9**).

The gospel ruling the conscience informs us of the reality of Christ living through me now. Gospel reckoning involves contemplating Christ and our position in Him. This is essential if we are to live radically identified with Christ in our walk. By reckoning our co-crucifixion and co-resurrection in Christ, our deadness to sin, and our life in God are brought into daily experience (**Rom 6:11-14**). It is the *exchanged* life lived out. It is the value of the cross brought into our most intimate life choices.

Now what happens when we allow the law to usurp the rightful rule of the gospel? What takes place in our lives when we permit the law to crawl back up and take its seat on the throne of conscience? First of all, the law calls out to flesh resources—it puts me back upon relying on my carnal efforts. Paul says in **Galatians 3:12** that the ‘*law is not of faith*’. In other words the law says ‘*do this and live*’. The law does not nudge me towards the divine enablement of God’s Spirit. Instead ‘*the letter of the law*’ puts our human strength (or weakness) to work.

Since the law is ‘not of faith’, it shifts our reliance from Christ to self. It tends to blind the heart to the offices of Christ. Under the reign of law in the conscience we cease feeding upon Christ as our all-sufficient Prophet, Priest, and King. Israel’s history bears out the fact that law is a woefully inadequate means of managing and controlling the sinful appetites of the flesh. The law on ‘tablets of stone’ makes demands and threatens for disobedience, but in its ‘finger-pointing’, it won’t lend a hand (**2 Cor 3:6-7**). Thus, the law as an external constraint is coercive and demanding, but it fails to supply an adequate motive and power source for obedience. Instead of helping us mortify sin, the law tends to stir up truancy (**Rom 5:20**). In addition, it tends to divide a man into two parts: 1) his secret heart affections (carnal appetites) and, 2) his religious self which may be outwardly conformed to law. This is a potentially dangerous arrangement, because it invites a breach between a man’s private life and public life. In private, if given a chance (especially if he thinks he won’t be caught), the man will often give expression to the carnal objects of his heart affections while publicly he remains respectable.

The law, as an inferior method of controlling the flesh, is answered by the superiority of the new covenant. The new covenant unites our deepest heart yearnings for happiness to Christ Himself. Unlike the law, the new covenant provides the motive and the power source for obedience. Christ’s infinite love, demonstrated at Calvary produces real ontological changes in the believer (a transformation of his inner being). The redeemed sinner is a new creation (**2 Cor 5:17**). The love of Christ animates him and controls him (**2 Cor 5:14-15**). The Spirit of God energizes his obedience (**Gal 5:16-25**). The law no longer is an irritating straitjacket to externally restrain him—instead it is written on the heart as a new inclination and life principle (**Heb 8:8-12**). Rather than merely being duty-driven, the believer takes delight in his spiritual exercises.

Apart from the discipline of grace, it is common for N.T. believers to forget the gospel, or discount its total relevance for all Christian living. When that happens, our default response is to manage conscience by law. But, when the law is allowed to usurp the gospel in the conscience, the individual loses sight of Christ’s glory. The wealth of being united to Christ fades from view and the believer returns to the toil of carrying his own eligibility for acceptance. Under that arrangement, the conscience becomes a place of endless turmoil and disputes. Self-loathing reenters, self-recriminations multiply. The individual becomes defensive, self-protective, private, critical, irritable, and controlling. Those sins are costly to our walk with God and to our relations with others. These sins are symptoms of spiritual pride, of demanding to qualify ourselves and carry our own eligibility.

The gospel applied is always the answer—it brings peace and integration to the soul in a way that the law has no hope of doing. The gospel conducts a kind of heart surgery. It brings back together the parts of our soul that sin has broken apart and fragmented. Christ brings completeness, wholeness, healing to sinners (**Is 53:5**). “. . . you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God” (**Rom 7:4**). When the gospel is on the throne of conscience, we consent to

have Christ carry our eligibility and qualification for God's acceptance of us. The gospel proclaims that Christ, by His propitiation, has cleared away every obstacle that stood in the way of beholding the glory of the Lord, and of enjoying the unbroken reception of the Father's love (**1 Jn 4:9-11**).

Now we all know that this unbroken enjoyment of the peace Christ has purchased is contested. We have to 'fight for joy' by means of the gospel. What remains of indwelling sin seeks to rob us of peace. Our new transgressions and our old ones are always calling for a courtroom 'trial' in our conscience. The conscience wants to schedule new legal trials. The conscience is a kind of courtroom, a place of law, prosecutions, evidence, and verdicts. Our problem is that we are better at listening to ourselves than talking to ourselves. We put the law back on the throne of conscience and then we listen to all its arguments and wind up taking sides against ourselves as if there has been no atonement made on our behalf! We slip into mental passivity and find that the old habits of listening to the accusations of conscience are allowed to hold greater sway over us than the gospel.

The mental 'tapes' of accusation play in an endless loop and we wind up giving more authority to the well-worn messages of condemnation than to the authority of the gospel. Years of self-loathing have cut deep channels. Like water seeking its lowest level, we easily slip back into the familiar and we find that our thoughts are again flowing in the deep grooves of guilt and accusation. True, a sense of guilt can point out where repentance is needed, but guilt cannot sanctify you.

Preaching the gospel to the self is how to erase the old tapes and record new ones. We ought to be about the business of composing gospel sermons to preach to ourselves—gospel sermons with very precise and specific application. These gospel sermons are designed to display to our conscience that real justice has been done against our sins in the crucifixion of Christ. "and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed" (**1 Pet 2:24; 3:18**). These sermons we preach to ourselves must contain the practical value of justification—that Christ is my immutable eligibility for God's acceptance, love and favor. Christ carries my lovability! Christ is my completeness. I am a broken wretch united to a perfect Savior. That is the arrangement of God's grace. I am a frail sinner, but I wear the perfect robe of Christ's imputed righteousness. Therefore, the heroism needed to face the worst things about myself, everything needed to go to war against what remains of indwelling sin has been provided in Christ.

Christ must have all the glory for my salvation. By re-enthroning law, I am placing myself in competition with Christ as the source of God-approved righteousness. When the law is allowed to evict the gospel from the throne of conscience, it pits *self* against Christ as to who will be 'Source Person'—who will supply what satisfies God Almighty. Only when I keep consenting by faith to rest in Christ as my *status, favor, acceptance, sonship, righteousness, and lovability* will I experience His love animating my heart affections and flooding my heart with peace.

Like a still mountain lake at sunrise, reflecting as a mirror the surrounding grandeur, the heart of the believer, when controlled by the peace of Christ, reflects the glory of the Lord. God wants my heart affections unhindered by agitations and inner disputes. He desires to be able to pass His hand over my heartstrings to make the spontaneous music of worship. Only when I am living by faith in Him will the lust for law and the demands of self-assertion lose their magnetic pull. The gospel enthroned in conscience keeps displaying the sufficiency of Christ to the eye of faith and to the demands of the divine justice. Therefore, where the gospel reigns, Christ reigns. There is no other source of the pervasive peace which surpasses all understanding (Phil 4:7).