

## Chased by a Dirty Conscience

Lenten Midweek #5 – 03/30/22 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Genesis 42:6-24 Pastor Keith Besel

### **Introduction**

- ✘ You know what; dreams really do come true – at least for Joseph. It is now a good 20 years since Joseph, the teenager dreamt of how his brothers would one day bow down before him.
  - ➔ And here tonight we see ten of those brothers down on their knees before Joseph, “with their faces to the ground” (v. 6).
- ✘ You see, they were hungry. In fact, the whole world was hungry.
  - ➔ Pharaoh’s dreams about seven years of plenty had come to pass, and now seven years of famine were underway. It was all happening just as Joseph had dreamt and foreseen it. Dreams really do come true.

### **I. The Conscience is a Gift from God**

- ✘ But for Joseph’s brothers, a nightmare was about to begin. For two decades they’ve been living a lie – twenty long years of hiding a deep, dark secret.
  - ➔ They had sold their own brother into a life of slavery and misery. They had lied to their father; breaking Jacob’s heart by telling him that Joseph was dead.
  - ➔ They allowed their hatred and jealousy to have its way with Joseph and then they smugly concealed their sin.
- ✘ But now they are bowing down before Joseph, the second-in-command over all of Egypt. Yet they didn’t recognize him since he was dressed like an Egyptian ... and again it had been 20 years.
  - ➔ But very soon they will be chased, hounded, and tortured by their own guilty consciences.
- ✘ I’m sure you all know what a conscience is, right? The problem is that our conscience is not always perfectly reliable. It is not infallible; but it is a good gift from God.
  - ➔ The Early Church was much better at helping Christians cultivate a healthy conscience than we are today. The primary difference between then and now is that they at least gave attention to the condition of their conscience.
  - ➔ They believed that the conscience was like a window through which you could view the world around you.
- ✘ You see, a bad, or guilty conscience is much like a dirty window. Given the season, I suspect that the windows at most of our houses right now are very dirty, bearing the grit and grime of a grueling winter.
  - ➔ It’s still a little early for spring cleaning, which means that when I look out my living room window or office window here at church, everything looks a little darker and dingier than it really is. It’s not unlike a person who has developed a cataract in his/her eye. Instead of seeing with crisp, bright clarity, things are hazy and smudgy.
  - ➔ Have you ever noticed that the dirtier a window is, the more you see your own reflection in that window – especially when you try to look out of a window at night?
- ✘ Well, a bad, or guilty conscience acts like that, affecting the way that you are able to view the world.

→ If you're concealing some shameful conduct or thought or history – in other words, when you're being chased by a bad conscience – the entire world begins to look dirty and dark, just like you. The truth is, because of the lie you're hiding, it often looks like everything and everyone is after you.

→ You become so paranoid and afraid of the truth that you end up being afraid of your own shadow. And the harder you try to look for an escape, the more you only see yourself; the reflection of your own sin and shame, as if you're peering through a dirty window.

## II. Repentance From God Cleanses the Conscience

✘ But there is an answer to cleansing a dirty conscience. 1 John 1:8–9 says this: “If we say we have no sin,” that’s trying to conceal and cover up our sin, “we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”.

→ The key word there is “cleanse”. If a guilty conscience is like a dirty window, then repentance is when the Lord, not us, cleanses the window of the “dirt” so that we can see the world bathed in the crystal clarity of our Lord’s marvelous light, life and love. Yes, repentance can do all of that, because it restores reality to our worldview.

→ The Bible is very clear that repentance is not something that you or I can conjure up and do on our own. It’s God’s idea and God’s work alone. So, confession and absolution is the only true solution for a wounded, fearful conscience.

✘ But just because it’s God’s work, that doesn’t mean that it’s easy for you and me, because this “help” from the Lord is often not what you might imagine.

→ You see, a conscience that is smug and comfortable, thinking that it has done, or cannot do wrong is impossible to cleanse, because thus far it has rejected God’s truth about that person’s sinful nature. Before a conscience can be cleaned God’s Law must first do its work.

→ This is why we see Joseph initially act so harshly with his brothers; why Joseph doesn’t reveal himself to his brothers right away; why he treats them like strangers and speaks so roughly to them. It’s necessary for Joseph to poke and pry into the deeper recesses of his brothers’ souls in order to wake up their dirty consciences so they will be able to see their sin and guilt.

## III. A Collective Conscience in Critical Condition

✘ Yes, these brothers have a classic case of a dirty conscience. Luther frames it like this when he writes, “Thus the sons of Jacob have an evil conscience. Therefore they tremble horribly and fear God’s vengeance” (AE 7:271). Yet the situation of Joseph’s brothers is even more dire. Their collective conscience is in critical condition, causing them to dread what lies around every corner. Luther continues, “These brothers are not only troubled about the sin of which they were conscious – although they took pains to cover and conceal it – but they were also afraid of all their words and deeds, and they imagined that there was new guilt in every action or thought” (AE 7:277).

→ In fact, as soon as Joseph demanded that they go and fetch their youngest brother to bring him down to Egypt, we hear them say to one another: “In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us” (v. 21). We see that Reuben correctly understands when he says in verse 22, “Now there comes a reckoning for his blood”. The diagnosis could not be clearer. The symptoms have become obvious. These brothers are being chased by a dirty conscience.

- ⊗ And it seems to them now that they are getting their just deserts. Many people attach clichés like this: “Their sin is coming back to bite them” or “bad karma comes calling” or “revenge and retribution are closing in quickly”.
- But in reality, what feels so painful to them is neither karma nor punishment. Joseph is not just toying with them. The truth is, God is leading them down the road of repentance. This pain they feel so sharply will eventually lead them to purity. Their conscience is being crushed by God’s law, so that the Gospel might cleanse it of all sin.

#### **IV. Sin and Guilt Reckoned in Jesus’ Blood**

- ⊗ Like Joseph’s brothers, you and I also know what it feels like to be chased by a guilty conscience; to have our view of the world clouded and smudged by the stain of our own sin. Reuben was right when he spoke about a “reckoning for [the] blood”.
- His restless conscience sensed that a bloody reckoning was coming; that their sin would have to be answered for by the shedding of blood. At the time Reuben didn’t know how right he was, because yes, our sin must be answered for; it can’t be covered up forever.
- Either you must answer for your sin and face the fallout, OR your Savior must answer for it and bear it all away.
- ⊗ What Reuben could only sense and know dimly by God’s promises, you and I now know for certain. Right before our eyes in this holy season of Lent we see it play out as we look back on the bloody reckoning that Jesus endured in our stead. Although He was pure and sinless, His blood was shed “*On the Old Rugged Cross*” to pay for our sin. It’s there that He endured the pain so that you might know purity and peace. It’s there that He was crushed so that you might be cleansed of every sin. Yes, Jesus Christ has answered for all your sins. The only question is whether you have the faith to believe that.
- Remember how Pilate gave the people the option of releasing Jesus or Barabbas? Barabbas was a rebel. Today we’d call him a terrorist. He was a murderer who had shed the blood of innocent people; he was guilty on all counts and set to receive a reckoning for his evil acts.
- Yet at the insistence of the crowd, guilty Barabbas went free ... and innocent Jesus was delivered over to death. The irony is obvious: the one who shed innocent blood went free while the innocent man went to the cross. Yet God’s law required that it be the shedding of innocent blood or else you and I could not be cleansed of our unrighteousness. This is God’s remedy for the tragedy of our sin.

#### **Conclusion**

- ⊗ So tonight we celebrate this truth: the Lord Jesus has a gift for you: the gift of a clean conscience.
- 1 John 1:9 from our Epistle Reading, “If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us” – “cleanse us from all unrighteousness”.
- ⊗ That means, my fellow Christians, you don’t have to be chased and hounded by a dirty conscience any more. You can actually live each day in the bright clarity of our Lord’s forgiveness and peace. You don’t have to be afraid of the truth of God’s justice against your sins. Jesus Christ has addressed your sin in truth and He has faced the Father’s justice on His cross. And in doing so, your conscience has been cleansed by His holy, precious blood. Amen.