

Small Group Guide

Christian Discernment: A Tale of Two Cities

Overview

This session explores how the condition of our conscience shapes the way we pray, relate to others, and engage with the world around us. Drawing from the contrasting examples of Lot in Sodom and the church at Ephesus, we examine three states of conscience -- weak, seared, and clear -- and consider how a clear conscience empowers us to pray with genuine faith and Kingdom purpose rather than from fear, victimhood, or religious routine.

Key Takeaways

1. The conscience is not static. Christian discernment and a clear conscience are developed and refined over time through relationship with the Holy Spirit, Scripture, community, and honest self-examination.

2. Three conscience conditions shape how we pray and live.

- A weak conscience prays from fear and victimhood, often asking God to judge enemies or simply protect us from harm.
- A seared conscience prays from religious routine and self-righteousness, going through the motions while losing genuine relationship with God.
- A clear conscience prays with surrender, asking God to defend and protect His goodwill and purpose for our lives and the lives of everyone involved.

3. The alternate trinity distorts our discernment. When our needs, wants, and desires are not submitted to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, our decision-making and prayer life become self-centered rather than Kingdom-centered.

4. Lot and Ephesus serve as warnings. Lot chose Sodom based on personal advantage and never meaningfully influenced the culture around him. The church at Ephesus did all the right things but lost its first love. Both are cautionary examples of what happens when the conscience is not kept clear.

5. Paul models clear-conscience prayer. Writing from prison, Paul did not pray for judgment against his captors or simply for personal deliverance. He prayed with gratitude and surrender, trusting God's goodwill and purpose over his own preferences.

Discussion Questions

Opening

- When you hear the phrase "you just know that you know," what comes to mind? Can you think of a time when you had that kind of inner knowing about a decision, a truth, or a direction in your life?

Exploring the Weak Conscience

- The sermon describes a weak conscience as overly sensitive, bound to legalism, and vulnerable to past conditioning. Have you ever experienced a season where your faith felt more like a checklist than a relationship? What did that feel like, and what helped you move through it?
- The pastor described praying, "Lord, turn upon my enemies the very curses they have sent to me." Have you ever prayed something similar out of a place of hurt or frustration? Looking back, how do you understand that prayer now?
- The pastor notes that a weak conscience often leads us to pray as victims -- asking God to defend us from others rather than asking Him to advance His purposes through us. How does that distinction land with you?

Exploring the Seared Conscience

- The church at Ephesus was doing everything right -- enduring hardship, rejecting false teaching, persevering -- yet Jesus said they had left their first love. How is it possible to be doctrinally sound and spiritually active while still losing genuine intimacy with God? Have you seen this happen?
- The sermon warns against rationalism replacing relationship. How do you personally guard against your faith becoming mechanical or routine while still valuing good doctrine and spiritual discipline?
- Lot sat at the gate of Sodom -- a position of real civic leadership -- yet the people of Sodom called him an alien and accused him of acting like a judge, suggesting he had never spoken up before. What does this say about the difference between holding a position of influence and actually exercising godly influence?

Exploring the Clear Conscience

- Paul prays from prison with gratitude and a clear conscience, without demanding judgment on his captors or simply asking for personal rescue.

What do you think made that kind of prayer possible for him? What would need to shift in your own heart to pray that way in a difficult situation?

- The pastor suggests reframing our prayers from "Lord, judge them" or "Lord, protect me" to "Lord, defend and protect your goodwill and purpose in my life and everyone else's life." How does that shift in language change the posture of the prayer? Does it feel natural or challenging to you?
- Jesus prayed in the garden, "Not my will, but your will be done," while under tremendous physical and emotional distress. The sermon presents this as the clearest example of a clear-conscience prayer. What does it mean practically to surrender your will when the stakes feel very high?

Applying It Together

- Think about a current situation in your life -- a relationship, a decision, a conflict -- where you are aware of praying primarily from a place of fear, self-protection, or judgment. How might you reframe that prayer to reflect surrender and trust in God's goodwill and purpose?
 - The sermon describes Christian discernment becoming so intuitive that you do not always need to stop and ask, "Lord, is this of you?" It simply becomes part of who you are. What spiritual habits or practices are helping you grow toward that kind of maturity? What might be hindering it?
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Practical Applications

This week, try one or more of the following:

- **Audit your prayers.** Set aside fifteen minutes to review how you have been praying about a specific difficult situation. Ask yourself honestly: Am I praying from a weak conscience (victimhood and fear), a seared conscience (mechanical obligation or self-righteousness), or a clear conscience (surrender and Kingdom purpose)? Write down what you notice.
- **Reframe one prayer.** Identify one prayer you have been praying that centers on your own protection, vindication, or the judgment of someone who has hurt you. Rewrite it with the posture of surrender, asking God to defend and protect His goodwill and purpose for you and for every person involved.

- **Practice stillness.** The sermon emphasizes that discernment grows in quietness before God. Set aside time this week -- even ten minutes -- to simply be still, invite the Holy Spirit to examine your heart, and listen without an agenda.
- **Examine your first love.** Reflecting on the church at Ephesus, ask yourself: Is there any area of my faith that has become more about performance or routine than genuine relationship with God? What was it like when you first encountered the Lord in that area? What would it look like to return there?
- **Pray for someone you find difficult.** Following Paul's example, choose one person you have been viewing as an adversary or obstacle and pray specifically that God would defend and protect His goodwill and purpose in their life. Notice what happens in your own heart as you do.

Closing Reflection

Close your time together by reading the following summary statement aloud as a group, slowly and with intention:

"Lord, I surrender my needs, my wants, and my desires to you. Would you defend and protect your goodwill and purpose for my life, for my family's life, and for everyone I engage? Have your way. In Jesus' name."

Take a moment of silence after reading it together, then invite anyone who wishes to share a brief word of response or prayer before closing.

For Further Study

- Romans 14 -- Paul's teaching on the weak conscience and granting grace to others
- 2 Peter 2, verses 7 and 8 -- Lot described as a righteous man whose conscience was grieved
- Genesis 13 and 19 -- The story of Lot's choices and their consequences
- Revelation 2, verses 1 through 7 -- The letter to the church at Ephesus
- 2 Timothy 1 -- Paul's prayer from prison with a clear conscience
- Ezekiel 16 -- The broader list of Sodom's sins beyond what is commonly cited
- Psalm 109 -- An example of an imprecatory prayer and what honest lament can look like