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II Corinthians 1:12-14 "A Clear Conscience"  
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Let's open our Bibles this morning to II Corinthians  
Chapter 1 verse 12.

Paul founded the Corinthian church, having been in town for 18 months, and it certainly was one of the most corrupt cities in the Roman Empire. When he left and then eventually ended up in Ephesus across the sea, where he would be three years planting yet another church, news began to arrive from Corinth that there were problems. The problems were mostly in the form of the Judaizers. They were men who came and followed Paul around for decades, tried to change the gospel to a matter of works, minimizing the gospel, emphasizing the law, and just caused havoc in the church and was one of Paul's greatest enemies. Certainly one of the enemies of the church today, where Jesus saves by grace.

Hearing the trouble, Paul sent -- or responded with a letter. We don't have it. It got to Corinth, Corinth wrote back. They had a lot of questions; Paul had a lot of answers, and really no results. But he wrote back in I Corinthians. We do have that letter. Timothy delivered it. And when Timothy came back, he didn't say it was better in Corinth, he said it's worse. The influence of these false prophets is terrible. There are just tons of believers turning to this false doctrine, turning away from the faith. And Paul broke his heart. I mean he was invested in this place. He loved these people. He made an unscheduled trip to Corinth that the Book of Acts does not cover, but his epistles to them mention more than once. He was rejected, he was withstood to his face, he was embarrassed. These leaders had dug in, and things were not good.

Paul went back to Ephesus and wrote what he called a severe letter. It was the third letter. It was delivered by Titus, who was much more aggressive than Timothy was. Paul hoped that maybe that would have some effect. And Paul waited for a while in Ephesus. His

three years were about up. He went to Troas, up along the coast, hoping to run into Titus with some good news. He didn't come. Across the sea, he went over to Europe to Macedonia, and then in Philippi ran into Titus, who had good news. There were changes happening in Corinth. Some of them were really good. A lot of the folks were no longer caught up with these false teachers, but they were coming back to the things of God. However, there were a lot of folks that had dug in and there was certainly a healthy opposition there, and Paul was glad for the good news, but worried about the rest. And so he wrote this letter, from probably Philippi, just to encourage the majority and address the minority that were still being caught up in these lies that were being told and in these men that were grasping for power.

So II Corinthians is really IV Corinthians, but we only have two of the letters. But we spent a week going over the introductory kind of things that we need to know for this letter. I hope you were here for that. Last week we opened up the letter with just the introduction, the greeting the first 11 verses that Paul wrote. And one of the things that he said in those first 11 verses was that he believed that all of the suffering that these people in the church had put him through, and it hurt him, was designed by God sometimes just to allow him to be more compassionate with others. He said, I found real comfort with God, and so now I'm able to comfort others. So, I don't feel even bad having to go through what I've gone through, because it made me a better servant of God and more able to serve others.

This morning he begins his defense against the accusations of these false teachers, and in the process as we go through, to help those who are still being caught up in them to get away from them, and to give them reasons why to turn away. But this morning as Paul begins his letter -- and we're only going to look at three verses. It is the most personal certainly that Paul has written. And it'll teach us much about suffering at the hands of others, false accusations, how do you deal with people like that. Paul would eventually end up here for several months; three of them to be exact, and deal with them. But there were still some powerful teachers in place. In fact, we read in II Corinthians Chapter 11, Paul said, "I'm so worried about you, that less like the serpent deceived Eve, that by his craftiness you might be turned away from the simplicity

that you have in Christ." He didn't want people to get away from or lose track of or turn away from the grace that God has given to save.

These liars in town, and there were plenty of them, looked to discredit Paul. They were pretty sure that if they could undermine his authority, then they could turn the doctrine to their advantage. But that they would really have a hard time replacing the truths that Paul had left until they could replace Paul. So they went after him with the kitchen sink. I think if you'll read through this letter, they bring up just about everything they could; none of it true. But whatever would stick against the wall, let's try that. So they said he was dishonest. They questioned his sincerity. After all, he'd said he was going to come visit twice and then he didn't show up. What kind of honesty is that? They said his words were untrustworthy, his actions were devious. They said he was unpredictable and that he was wishy-washy, that he was self-serving. They questioned his relationship with the people there. They questioned his theology, because that was obviously what they wanted to replace.

Now, I should tell you, at least from the reading of this book, that Paul does not seem to go out of his way to defend himself strictly because it was him that was the target. What he did see was that he had a reputation to uphold, because with him, reputation and teaching went together. In other words, if he's discredited, then what he's taught would be discredited as well, and so people would stop listening. They'd stop following. And Paul figured he had laid out for them the truth of God, but if he's discredited, so is the truth that he is teaching. So from that standpoint, for their sake, for the sake of the church, he goes to bat to defend himself, but you don't really find Paul out there just trying to say, hey, don't make, don't accuse me of something I didn't do. That doesn't seem to be of importance to him. But he wanted to protect the people from these deceivers, and so if they were going to sell their brand of demonic lies, they'd have to tear down his authority first.

So in his opening defense, just these three verses, 12, 13, and 14, Paul wants to talk about his integrity, his spiritual integrity. And he doesn't call upon his friends to write letters of support or to bring a couple guys in front, "Well, you just talk to so-and-so. They

know me." Instead he goes to a higher human court; he talks about his own conscience. I think it's a good topic to discuss, because the Bible talks a lot about our consciences. In fact, it says that if we have a clear conscience, then we'll have great peace, and comfort, and joy. And people can accuse you of just about anything, but if your conscience exonerates you, then you're not stumbled. And that's Paul's argument. He knew who he was in the Lord.

These false teachers went after Paul on three levels. On a moral level, they reasoned that Paul must be suffering so much because God was angry with him. How could anyone go through those types of trials if the Lord's on their side? They almost sounded like Job's counselors." You must have done something wrong, Job. Look what God's letting you go through." From a relationship standpoint, they wanted to say that Paul was manipulative and deceptive and insincere, that he couldn't be counted on to be a friend to the people in Corinth, and on a theological level they just said, well, he's not telling you the truth. You got to keep the law, you got to work hard, you got to do your best. None of it biblical at all, but that's what they went after.

For Paul the sadness in all of this is that the people that he loved and had led to the Lord and taught for a year and a half, some of them were being caught up in all this. Folks that he used to be friends with and helped now had turned against him. They were starting to believe the lies that were being told. So Paul starts off -- he -- like I said, we're taking sections, so we'll try to knit them together as we go. But Paul starts off by saying, my conscience in all of this is clear. Right?

So here's what he says in verse 12, "For our boasting is this: That the testimony of our conscience that we have conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and with godly sincerity, and not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, and we have done so more abundantly towards you."

It was in November 27th of 1983 that Avianca Airlines, I think it was Flight 11, was coming from Paris to Bogota, Colombia, by way of Madrid, Spain. And at the Barajas Airport, the weather, according to the F.A.A. report later on, was clear. There were no mechanical difficulties with the 747 that was flying in. The crew

was experienced. The pilot had over 25,000 hours at the controls. He had landed in this airport well over a couple of dozen times. The flaps on the plane were fully extended, the landing gear was down. Everything looked fine, except the plane crashed into these low-lying hills 7 miles short of the runway in Madrid. The plane cartwheeled, broke into pieces. It came to rest upside down. 181 out of 192 people were killed. The report said, the investigator's report, that it was a series of errors by the crew, who believed that the plane was where it really wasn't. Investigators said that they -- on the cockpit recorder, heard the pilot and the copilot arguing with the ground proximity warning system that was yelling "Pull up, pull up," but they were sure that it was wrong. In fact, they recorded one of them yelling, "Shut up, Gringo," and then turning the system off completely. It led to the deaths of so many people. I think it's a pretty compelling kind of illustration to see how ignoring warnings can be fatal. Physically if you're in pain for any length of time, your body's telling you something. Either that or just saying you're old, and live with it.

Your conscience is a warning system for your soul. It reacts when there's proximity of sin. It begins to yell, "Pull up, pull up." Today's culture aggressively seeks to silence our conscience. They advise people that it is better to ignore it, because conscience hurts self-esteem. So, look, the problems aren't you, it's the external factors around you beyond your control. If you'll just ignore the guilt that you feel, you'll feel good about yourself. The problem is, God has given to us a conscience.

In Greek the word "conscience" means know yourself, and it is something that God innately has created into every life. When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in Chapter 2, he said that, "There's no partiality with God, and those who sin without the law will be judged without the law, and those who had sinned having the law, they'll be judged by the law. For it isn't the hearer of the law in the site of God that is justified, but the doer of the law." And then he goes on and he says this: "If gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature those things written in the law, their conscience will bear them witness, whether they are themselves in their thoughts excusing or accusing them. And in the day of God's judgment, the secrets of men's hearts will be

revealed." A long way to say, God gives everyone a conscience. And this innate creation within our lives is designed to help us get to some direction regarding behavior that is approved or behavior that is condemned.

Now, the conscience isn't infallible. It is not equal to God's word. It is not equal to the voice of God. It is a human faculty, and it works by adjudicating, if you will, action by the light of the greatest standard that it knows. In other words, you may very well approve something God hates, because that's all you know; or you may condemn yourself and think God doesn't condemn you, because it's all you know. When John wrote 1 John Chapter 3, he wrote, "If our own hearts condemn us, then God is greater than our heart. He knows all things. But if our hearts condemn us not, then we can have confidence towards God."

The final judgment of our lives obviously depends upon what God thinks. When Paul wrote the I Corinthians letter and they were judging him, it's the same group, he said, "It's a very small thing that you judge me or that I would be judged by any human court. I don't even judge myself. But in that, even though I know nothing against myself, that doesn't justify me. The end is God's judgment". What would God say? And until He does, we'll just wait. But when He does, He's going to come and bring to light all of the hidden things in men's hearts, and then everyone will have their reward from the Lord."

Since conscience operates with the highest standard a person perceives, conscience at best is a skylight. It's not a lamp. It doesn't generate its own light, but it lets light in. Here's your advantage: As a Christian, the more you know God's word, the better your conscience will operate, the more protective it'll be. The yelling of "pull up" will be often, but it'll save your life. If you're left to the world, your conscience may at best just function on the human level that you understand, and as the culture's kind of moral line changes, so will your conscience and you'll approve what the Bible would disapprove of. But once God's light gets in, now you begin to make the right calls and you begin to see things as they should be. Your conscience becomes your friend. It becomes an added bonus; a help, if you will. It is where the Holy Spirit often does its greatest work. We'll know ourselves even as we are known. And it is important to see that at least from a Bible standpoint,

one of the goals that God sets before His people is that we should have a clear conscience.

Paul when he wrote to Timothy, his protégé, he said to them, "This is a faithful saying. It's worthy of all acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and I'm the chief." Four verses later he wrote, "And so I have faith with a good conscience, but some have rejected that, and concerning their faith they have been made shipwreck." We need to make a goal of having a good conscience, a clear conscience. How's your conscience this morning?

Peter wrote in his first letter, "Sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, be always ready to give an answer for the hope that lies within you to everyone that asks, do it with meekness and in fear; have a good conscience, so that even if they defame you as an evildoer you might be reviled for your conduct, they'll be ashamed." And you'll be protected. Good conscience protects you against false accusation. And that's Paul's answer here.

Before the Sanhedrin there in Acts 23, since we've been doing that on Wednesday night, Paul stood up to give his defense, and it says he looked earnestly at the council, and the first words out of his mouth were, "Men and brethren, I've lived in a good conscience before God to this day." They were accusing him of all kinds of things. He said, "My conscience is clear. I have a good conscience towards the Lord." When we are saved, God's cleanses our conscience from a life-long accumulation of guilt and of shame, of self-contempt. God forgives me. Then I can forgive myself. He's provided a way out.

When Paul wrote to the Hebrews in Chapter 9, he said, "How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit have offered himself without spot unto God, cleanse your conscience from your dead works so that you can serve a living God?" The next chapter, same book, "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience." So when you get saved, God cleanses that conscience that He creates within you, and you're now in a position to let God's light shine like a skylight; right? You're going to have a reaction to the things of God, and you're going to have a help in your walk.

When Paul stood before Felix there in Acts Chapter 24, his first words out of his mouth to Felix was, "Felix, I've always strived to have a conscience that's without offense before God and before men. I've sought to live a life that I can be proud of and rest in." So notice what Paul begins with here. And like I say, he hasn't addressed really anything yet, but he starts with, I know where I stand. "This is my boast," he says. It's a crazy word, isn't it, boasting? Because we always think of boasting in terms of achievements and say the Lord doesn't allow boasting in achievements, and you'd be right. But you'd be wrong if you said God doesn't allow boasting, because everywhere you turn, He loves it when you boast about Him. And here's Paul's boast: "I've got a clear conscience." In fact, he'll say down in a couple of more verses there -- or a couple more parts of this verse, I've done so by the grace of God. So Paul is willing to say very clearly, God has given me a way to live my life that keeps me in a clear conscience. Despite what these false teachers are saying about me, that doesn't move me.

The word "boast" is -- I think it appears 59 times in the New Testament. It appears 29 times just in this letter. It is one of those anchors for Paul. Right? I'm boasting in the Lord. And the Bible would say that's fitting and it's approved and it's acceptable with God.

Here's what Jeremiah wrote, Chapter 9: "Thus sayeth the Lord: 'Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his strength, let not the rich man boast in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understand and he knows Me, that I'm the Lord, that I exercise lovingkindness, and judgment, and righteousness to the earth. In these I delight.'" Paul said at the end of Chapter 1 of I Corinthians, if you want to boast, boast in the glory of God. Boast in God. That's what Paul is doing. I got a clear conscience, man. These guys are laying up for me and trying to accuse me of so many things, but I just want you to know before we get started, my conscience is clear.

"We've conducted ourselves," notice verse 12, "both in the world and more abundantly towards you with simplicity and with godly sincerity, driven by godly wisdom, not the wisdom of this world." Paul says his conscience was clear in how he's been living in the world, and he used two words to describe them: One simplicity, one godly

sincerity, and he was able to apply them to both his life in the world and his life in the church. He had been among them, after all, for some 18 months now. Paul wrote to the Romans, "I tell the truth in Christ. I'm not lying. My conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit." That's his argument. That's his beginning, if you will, before these folks.

Simplicity. The word simplicity here in verse 12 is the Greek word "hagios," which is the word for saint, or to be simply set aside. Right? To all of the saints. You remember we started that back in verse 1 last week. A saint means to be set apart for the Lord. It is translated "simplicity" here because it suggests a life that only has one purpose, or isn't cluttered with a lot of ideas or a lot of goals. I came to you with one goal: I wanted to see you do well in Christ. So I've lived my life that way. Unmixed motives, without ulterior motives.

And then godly sincerity. Sincerity is a compound word in Greek and it means to combine light with judgment. Those are the two words. It comes from the Latin word, "sincero", and "sincero" is by its translation means without wax. It was a word that was coined in those days with potters who made pots, and they took a long time to make, sometimes they cracked, and you didn't want to start over, so they would line the cracks with wax. And then when they were glazed or painted over, it looked pretty good until you put it in the sun and then the thing would just fall apart. So in order to combat that, people would buy pots and they would hold them up to the light and then make a judgment. They would see the wax. It was different than the clay. And so they came up with the word "sincero," without wax. And that's what Paul used here. My life was an open book. There's no cracks that you can't see. I don't have any skeletons in my closet. I'm as good as what you see. I can survive the light of your scrutiny. That's the way I've lived my life. So my conscience is clear because of the way that I've lived.

And Paul characterizes his conduct as godly sincerity, even though he'd be the first to admit that wasn't his doing, it was the Lord's doing. Notice in verse 12, he adds the word that, "I would live this way not with fleshly wisdom, but by God's grace." In other words, I can't take any credit for the life that I now live.

God's done that within me, but He's done within me as I've lived my life depending on His grace and His word, not the world. Proof of his godliness and the validity of his clear conscience was that he behaved the same way in the world as he did in the church. Notice what he says there: In the world and in the church. Now, I don't know if you're the same at work as you are here. You look really good here. You sing, you have a Bible open, your hands are raised. You're paying attention, most of you. Not bad. But I don't know how you are at work. But you know, and God knows. Here is Paul's argument: Doesn't matter where you find me, I'm the same. I'm walking with God. I'm serving the Lord. You can depend on what you find. And that's not true for everyone, and you know who you are. But Paul at every place was consistent. In fact, his way of life against the backdrop of a very corrupt city would have shined by comparison.

So Paul's first point in dealing with these false charges from these false prophets that were levied against him by his critics was, look, my conscience exonerates me. I don't know anything about me that you could take a hold of or begin to point out. Now, understand that Paul's not saying he's sinless. In fact, he'll say everything but that. He'll say to the Corinthians, I Corinthians Chapter 4, I know that in me, that in my soul dwells no good thing, and I'm not justifying the fact that I can't find anything in me, because the Lord knows. The Lord knows better than me about me. But I can't hang onto or grab hold of things that I can change. But Lord, search me, know me, try me. See if there are any wicked in me. Lead me in the ways of everlasting. That's what the Psalmist wrote. That's Paul's heart. So Paul wasn't saying, like, I don't mess up, but he's just saying I don't have in my heart the things that you're accusing me of. And I'm able to stand before the Lord with great confidence, and I'm proud of what he's done in my life and how he's changed it. That might very well have been me before. That's not me now. It's a good argument. Deliberate in his walk.

He then says in verse 13, "For we are not writing any other things to you than what you read or understand. And now I trust you will understand, even to the end (although you now understand in part), that we are your boast as you also will be ours, in the day of the Lord Jesus." Paul was not guilty of the wrongdoings that they

were accusing him of. And one of the things that we'll run into when we go through the book is that they will question Paul's dealings with them or even his words to them as having some kind of hidden meaning. He will say in Chapter 7 verse 2 of this book, "Can you just open your hearts to us? We've wronged no one. We've corrupted no one. We've cheated no one."

He writes in Chapter 11 of this book, "When I came to you, and indeed when I came, I had needs, but I was a burden to none of you. And what I lack, those in Macedonia supplied. And in everything I kept myself from being a burden to you, and I will keep myself from that." I never asked you for any help. I didn't ask you to give and give some more. I came to serve, not to take.

Here in Chapter 1 as we get towards the end of it, we are going to see that one of the things that they questioned Paul about was the way that he spoke, and they would say, well, he made travel plans. We made plans to receive him, and then he didn't show up, and then he canceled his coming again. Look, this is not a guy that could be trusted. He's always working with words and trying to make it sound like it's something that it's not, and so we should be really careful. And Paul says here in verse 14, and in verse 13, look, everything I say I mean. I'm not writing, like, a limerick here or some kind of code. There's no hidden messages in what I'm saying. I'm not double speaking to hide from you or to confuse things from you. This isn't mental or verbal gymnastics. This isn't a sales pitch. What you read, verse 13, is what I mean, simply what I meant. I'm not using lawyer language, who purposely use ambiguities for their own benefit. Paul is just saying, look, I just -- when I say I'm mad, I'm mad; when I'm hungry, I'm hungry; when I'm tired, I'm tired. What does that mean? It means I'm hungry, tired. That's it. But they were trying to twist his words, and it hurt Paul. It grieved Paul. These are people that they had slaved over and prayed over and taught and chased down and helped, and now they were turning away. But his peace was before the Lord. Some had accused Paul of having a hidden agenda. He says here in verse 13, no hidden agenda. My writings are straightforward and unambiguous. They're consistent. They're transparent. They're genuine. In fact, the words "to the end" translate the word "teleios," which just means when all is said and done, or when everything has been written, when everything has been completed.

And he said to them, hopefully by then you'll see that we can brag about you and you can brag about us when we stand before the Lord. You'll be able to point to us and say, those are the people that led me to Jesus, and we're going to be able to point to you and say, those are the people that God saved as we were able to share His Word. And there'll be a joy, and whatever misunderstandings there were, they'll be gone. I know you get it in part, he said. I hope in the end you get it completely. He wanted to boast in them. He wanted them to boast in him. But Paul said his conscience was clear. His letters were consistent with his person.

Paul wasn't a huckster. Paul wasn't twisting the truth for his own benefit. And the Corinthians knew it. In fact, at the end of Chapter 2 here, this is what he writes, verse 17: "We are not, as many, peddling the word of God; but with sincerity, as from God, we are speaking to you in the sight of God in Christ." And then in Chapter 4 verse 2, he says this: "We have renounced the hidden things of shame, we aren't walking in craftiness. We aren't handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth we are commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." We aren't hustling anyone. Some were being sucked in by these lies. Paul wanted them to think otherwise. I can't wait to stand before the Lord with you one day, proud of what God did in your life through us, and you for us. In fact, if you read the first Thessalonian letter, Chapter 2, Paul will say to them at the end of the chapter, "What is our rejoicing in our hope and our crown of joy? Isn't it you in the presence of Jesus with us?" You're our joy. This is why we do what we do. This is all that matters to us.

So accuse me of what you want, Paul says, but my conscience is clear. That's a great way to live, isn't it? With a clear conscience. That should be your goal and mine, that before the Lord, clear conscience. Are we sinful? Sure. Are we going to fall out? Sure. But either we're trying to do the right thing or we're not. We're either seeking to walk with God or we're just hiding our sin with a bunch of spiritual language. You know the difference.

Let me give you a couple of things you might want to do to have a clear conscience. No. 1, I would say to you learn God's word, because the more of God's word that

gets in, the more clearly you'll see the truth about yourself and about what God wants to do in your life. Let God's word in. We read in Psalm, I think it's Psalm 37, "The law of God is in his heart and then none of his steps slide." So that's a good place to start. Fill your life with God's word. It'll light your conscience. Second of all, don't just learn it rote; meditate on it. The Psalmist writes, "Your word have I hid in my heart so I don't sin against you." It's one thing to memorize, it's another thing to begin to practice. So learn God's word, meditate on it. Thirdly, pray, a lot, for your own well-being. Jesus said more than once, "Watch and pray." The spirit is willing, the flesh is weak. You got to pray, because you're going to fall if you don't get God's help. You need to be able to say, by the grace of God, here I am. Fourthly, avoid spiritual pride. Paul was a humble guy, though he had every reason I guess from a worldly standpoint to just shout and say, oh, yeah, I see what God's done with you compared to me, buddy. But the Bible tells us, "If you're standing, take heed lest you fall." Fifthly -- is that fifthly? -- yeah, I think that'll be -- the next one, recognize the seriousness of sin. Your sin and mine put Jesus on the cross. It's a horrible thing. And then purpose in your heart not to sin. Make that a determination. I don't want to sin. I'm going to stand against it. "I have sworn and I confirm that I will keep your righteous judgment." That's Psalm, I think, 119, somewhere in there. "I have sworn and confirmed I'm going to keep your judgments." And finally I would say to you, at the first hint of temptation, run. James said that we are tempted when we are drawn away by our own desires and enticed, and if that is allowed to continue, eventually sin is born and then death follows.

Learn God's word, meditate on it, watch in prayer, avoid spiritual pride, recognize the spiritual seriousness of sin, purpose in your heart not to sin, and run at the first sign of trouble, and then you're going to have a clear conscience. Isn't that what you want anyway? I know you do.