

Understanding Your Conscience

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Man has a dual nature. "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:23). The body is temporal; the spirit is eternal. Man will live somewhere forever (heaven or hell), depending upon the way he lives in this life. The word of God repeatedly instructs us to obey His word and strive to live blameless and to be holy.

I want to give a **good** definition of **conscience** because many do not know how the word is used. Conscience is used with the following meaning:

What Is Conscience?

Greek definition: **sunidesis**: "Lat. conscientia [lit. 'joint-knowledge'] . . . a. the consciousness of anything with a gen of the obj . . . a soul conscious of sins, Heb. x.2... (Heb.10:2) b. the soul as distinguishing between what is morally good and bad, prompting to do the former and shun the latter, commending the one, condemning the other." (*Henry Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon, page 602*).

The English definition: **conscience** -"from Latin conscientia, a joint knowledge, feeling, from conscire; **con-**, together with, and **scire**, to know."

1. "Internal or self-knowledge, or judgement of right and wrong; of the faculty, power or principle within a person which decides on the lawfulness or unlawfulness of his actions and affections, and approves or condemns them.
2. Consciousness: knowledge of our own actions or thoughts (Obs).
3. The estimate or determination of conscience; justice; honesty." (*Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, Unabridged*).

From Webster's New World Dictionary, College Edition: Conscience: " ...Consciousness, knowledge, feeling, sense, moral sense **conscire** 'with + scire,' to know, replacing ME. **inwit**, knowledge within, a knowledge or feeling of right and wrong, with a compulsion to do right; moral judgment that prohibits or opposes the violation of a previously recognized ethical principle."

These definitions of *conscience* indicate that the intelligence is not the same as conscience. Moral behavior rests upon a good conscience. One must do what he knows to be right.

What the Scriptures Say About Conscience

- "And they, when they heard it, went out one by one, beginning from the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman, where she was, in the midst" (John 8:9 ASV).
- "And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst" (John 8:9 KJV).

Lived in All Good Conscience

- "And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day" (Acts 23:1).

Conscience Void of Offense Toward God and Men

- "And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men" (Acts 23:16).

Conscience Bears Witness

- "Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another" (Rom. 2:15).
- "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost" (Rom. 9:1).

Response for Conscience Sake

- "Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake" (Rom. 13:5).

Weak and Defiled Conscience

- "Howbeit there is not in every man that knowledge: for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled" (1 Cor. 8:7).
- "For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols" (1 Cor. 8:10).
- "But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ" (1 Cor. 8:12).

Conscience Sake

- "Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, that eat, asking no question for conscience sake" (1 Cor. 10:25).
- "If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast, and ye be disposed to go; whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience sake" (1 Cor. 10:27).
- "But if any man say unto you, This is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that shewed it, and for conscience sake: for the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof" (1 Cor. 10:28).
- "Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other: for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience?" (1 Cor. 10:29).

Witness of Conscience

- "For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward" (2 Cor. 1:12).

Commending Conscience

- "But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2).

Good Conscience

- "Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned" (1 Tim. 1:5).
- "Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck" (1 Tim. 1:19).
- "Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ" (1 Pet. 3:16).
- "Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly" (Heb. 13:18).
- "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 3:21).

Pure Conscience

- "Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience" (1 Tim. 3:9).
- "I thank God, whom I serve from my forefathers with pure conscience, that without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day" (2 Tim. 1:3).

Seared Conscience

- "Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron" (1 Tim. 4:2).

Defiled Conscience

- "Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled" (Tit. 1:15).

Law Not Make Good Conscience

- "Which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience" (Heb. 9:9).

Purge Conscience From Dead Works

- "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (Heb. 9:14).

No Conscience of Sin

- "For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins" (Heb. 10:2).

Sprinkled From Evil Conscience

- "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:22).

For Conscience Toward God

- "For this is thank worthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully" (1 Pet. 2:19).

The Function of Conscience

The definition of conscience is *con* - "together with," and *science* - "to know." It applies to that part of the mind that knows the motives, deeds and words of a person that no other but God can know.

Conscience is not a guide. It cannot and does not tell the person who possesses it what is right and what is wrong. Its only function is to let its possessor know whether or not he is ACTING in harmony with what he believes to be right and wrong.

Often we hear the admonition: "Follow your conscience," which means they believe conscience tells one what is right and what is wrong. And if one believes a thing is right, it is right for him to do it. That is a lie! It is the heart of *humanism*. The devil invented no greater deception than to make one believe he is right if he **thinks** he is right.

Conscience can not be a guide for anything because that is not its function. Conscience cannot be a safe guide for anyone because:

1. *It would have to be infallible.* The only safe and reliable guide in spiritual things, with one's eternal destiny in the balance, is the infallible word of God. It is not the function of conscience to guide. Without knowledge of right and wrong, conscience is paralyzed.

The inspired apostle Paul said he persecuted the way of Christ, putting both men and women in prison for serving the Lord (Acts 22:4). Before king Agrippa he said, "I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 26:9). He said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day" (Acts 23:1). He said he did many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth, including persecuting Christians, even consenting to their death, and at the time he thought he ought to do these things. He was acting in good conscience, but he was fighting against Jesus Christ by trying to destroy his word and work. He did this with a good conscience. Paul said he "was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief" (1 Tim. 1:13).

2. *Some thought they were right when they were wrong.* "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Prov. 16:25). The man who thinks he is going in the right way has a good conscience, but this verse says it may be the ways of death. Paul "made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison" (Acts 8:3). He knew the truth only when the Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:4). At that point he had knowledge that Jesus was the Son of God, and to follow his former course, he would have had a guilty conscience.

The apostle described his conviction before he knew that Christ was the Son of God. "For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it; and profited in the Jews' religion above many equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers" (Gal. 1:13-14). While he was doing this he thought he was doing the will of God (Acts 26:9). He had a good conscience (Acts 23:1), but he said he was persecuting the church "beyond measure." He said he had a conscience always void of offence toward God, and toward men" (Acts 24:16). But he did it ignorantly in unbelief (1 Tim. 1:13).

3. *If conscience is a guide, religious people are hopelessly divided because of their consciences.* The unity of the faith once delivered to the saints is useless. People are making their consciences their guides, and people have different consciences. How can we say anyone is wrong about anything unless we can know that he did not have a good conscience? At the time the apostle Paul said he persecuted the church of the Lord, and did many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth, he said he had a good conscience. If conscience is a safe guide, he was doing right because he said he had a conscience void of offence toward God and all men. Was his conduct right? The warring creeds of religious people speaks loudly for the failure of conscience as a guide.
4. *If conscience is a safe and reliable guide, why did some have to change?* Paul said he obtained mercy because he persecuted Christ and the church. He changed. Why? He said he did it ignorantly in unbelief, and he thought he ought to do these things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth, yet he said he had a good conscience, void of offence toward God and men; a pure conscience, yet he was wrong and had to change to please God. I have studied the New Testament with many who began the study believing they were right.

What is the function of conscience? What does it do?

1. To "bear witness together" is to have two to bear witness to the same thing: one's conscience bears witness with his spirit that something is true. "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost" (Rom. 9:1). Just as "The Spirit bears witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:16); we bear witness to self (Rom. 2:12-15).
2. The conscience sits in judgment on one's heart and conduct in harmony with his knowledge of right and wrong. (1 Cor. 8:7-11; 10:25-29).
3. The conscience accuses or excuses one of his motives, thinking, conduct and words; and it convicts him in wrong doing based upon his understanding of right and wrong. "Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another" (Rom. 2:15). "And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst" (John 8:9).
4. The conscience commends or defends one (Rom. 2:15).

There Are Different States of Conscience

1. One may have a **good** conscience. "And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day" (Acts 23:1). "Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned" (1 Tim. 1:5). "Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck" (1 Tim. 1:19). "Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ" (1 Pet. 3:16). "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 3:21). "Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly" (Heb. 13:18). "And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men" (Acts 24:16). "Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience" (1 Tim. 3:9).
2. One may have a **weak** conscience (1 Cor. 8:10-12).
3. One may have a **defiled** conscience (1 Cor. 8:7; Tit 1:15).
4. One may have a **seared** conscience (1 Tim. 4:1-2).
5. One may have an **evil** conscience (Heb. 10:22; 6:6).

How to Use Conscience

No one can escape his conscience as long as it functions, but if he destroys his conscience, he will have no brakes when temptations attack.

One may destroy his conscience when he continually violates it in his motives, speech and conduct. He will "sear" his conscience until it no longer urges him to resist the evil he knows. It works just as the brake linings on a car. Start down hill full speed with your foot on the gas peddle and on the brakes at the same time and keep on going. By the time you reach the bottom the brakes are burned so that they will not hold. The brakes are gone; they will not stop the car any longer. That is what happens to one whose conscience is seared; he has no inner restraint to wrong doing, or urge to do what he knows is right. His conscience is destroyed.

1. Wilful ignorance tends to destroy the conscience. "And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent" (Acts 17:30). "For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water . . ." (2 Pet. 3:5). Men do many things in ignorance, but when one can know better and should know better, but will not make the effort, he is willingly ignorant. Such a person will destroy his conscience in time by trying to avoid knowing right and wrong in his life.

2. One who continually makes excuses for not doing what he knows to be right will in time destroy his conscience.
3. Violating one's conscience is akin to suicide. "I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean" (Rom. 14:14). "He that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23).

We Must Respect Our Conscience

That is not the same as "obeying" or "following" our conscience, because that is not its function to guide or lead us in our choices in life. That is the function of intellect, emotion and volition. One's conscience simply and only accuses or excuses him/her when he/she responds in thought, word or action to what he/she knows is right or wrong, and they make the choice to think, act or speak.

1. Obedience to the faith as one knows it will produce a good conscience. "Now the end" (purpose) "of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned" (1 Tim. 1:5). "Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake" (Rom. 13:5).
2. One with a guilty conscience is miserable, until he "sears" or destroys his conscience. Judas is an example of what happens when one overrules their conscience. He knew better, and was told he would betray Jesus to be put to death. When the opportunity came, he willingly did what he knew to be wrong. "Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, what is that to us? see thou to that" (Matt. 27:3-5). The governor Felix heard the gospel, but did nothing about it. "And after certain days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, which was a Jewess, he sent for Paul, and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee" (Acts 24:24-25).

How to Obtain a Good Conscience

Men and women are made pure and clean from their sins by the blood of Christ. That is the only way to have sins forgiven forever. "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Heb. 9:14). "For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because the worshipers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins" (Heb. 10:2).

Faith and baptism, the first and last conditions stated in the gospel of Christ for the remission of sins, are necessary to have a good conscience before God. "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:22). "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the

putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ)" (1 Pet. 3:21).

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Preacher of the Word (Vol. III, October, 1998, #10)
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