

Biblical Discipleship

Lesson 16 - Developing Conscience

Conscience is a human faculty that judges our actions and thoughts by the highest standard we know, and it is built into everyone's inner being (Romans 2:15). When we violate our conscience, it condemns us, causing feelings of shame, regret, anxiety, disgrace, and fear. When we follow conscience, it commends us, bringing joy, peace, self-respect, well-being and gladness.

Conscience can be informed by culture, tradition, social attitudes, family, and biblical truth. All these sources may, or may not, agree with God's holy standards. For example, in Romans 14:14 Paul says, *...I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean.* This is not because God says it is unclean, but because his misinformed conscience tells him it is unclean (see also 1 Corinthians 8:4-7).

Because conscience can be directed by the world's views, it is critical to have a conscience that is informed by the truth of God's Word. Error, tradition, human wisdom, philosophy, and wrong moral influences can corrupt and hinder conscience (Colossians 2:6-8, 20-23).

How well conscience works is determined by the amount of truth we take in and by the degree to which we keep our conscience undamaged by sin (1 Timothy 3:9).

If we are not careful, our conscience can become so insensitive that we become ruled by hypocrisy and blinded to sin's ugliness (1 Timothy 4:1-2; Titus 1:15). This happens when sin constantly dominates our lives.

Some facts about conscience:

- Jeremiah 17:1 Conscience REMEMBERS exactly what we have done and records it in our heart.
- Romans 2:15 Conscience ACCUSES us when we are guilty and DEFENDS us when we are innocent.
- 2 Corinthians 1:12 Conscience is a WITNESS, testifying either for us or against us.
- 1 John 3:19-21 Conscience is a JUDGE, condemning or affirming us.
- 1 Samuel 24:5 Conscience is the MEMORY, inflicting grief when our guilt is discovered.

The world has desensitised its conscience (Romans 2:14-15; Psalms 36:1-2). However, as believers in Jesus Christ, when our conscience triggers sorrow for a wrong

we have done, the correct response to this guilt is repentance and a seeking forgiveness. Expose wrong for what it really is - SIN (Ephesians 5:11).

Many people are like those in 2 Corinthians 7:10, whose sorrow is worldly and superficial. Worldly sorrow does not lead to repentance, rather, it leads to denial and justification of wrong behaviour. Therefore, their conscience is never cleansed (Proverbs 28:13; Mark 2:17).

Some deny conscience and seek treatment for the guilt they feel rather than repenting of their sin. Instead of confession, repentance, reconciliation, and forgiveness, they turn to denial, self-justification, blame shifting, self-forgiveness, anything that may silence their conscience.

The world does not allow the word '*sin*' to enter into its thinking. Instead, it replaces '*sin*' with words like 'error', 'mistake', 'superstition' and 'delusion'.

Guilty people sometimes speak of themselves as victims or addicts to justify their wrong behaviour. Rebellious attitudes are not medical or psychological disorders, they are sin. Excusing sin away as a disease fails to deal with the seriousness of what conscience is warning of.

God's response:

- 1 Samuel 5:20 *Woe to those who call evil good and good evil...*
- 1 John 1:10 *If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His Word has no place in our lives.*
- Romans 3:10 *There is no one righteous, not even one.*

Sin's Effect on an Unbelievers Conscience

The world is full of people who deny God's existence and their own sinfulness. If people can't or won't see the depravity of their sin, they will not be able to apply God's remedy for sin (Psalm 14:1; 19:1-6; Mark 2:17; Romans 1:20-22).

Romans 1:18-32 explains how God's judgement works in the lives of people who refuse to listen to the truth which God has put within their hearts and conscience. God's judgment develops in three worsening steps. The damage a person does against his or her own conscience is God's immediate judgement within them.

1. In :23-24, God gives them over to sexually immoral relationships.
2. In :25-27, because they continue in sexual

sin instead of living in God's truth, God may give them over to shameful lusts and sexual sin with people of the same sex.

- 3. Finally, in :28-32,** God gives them over to a totally depraved mind. They are now totally controlled and filled with the sin they love so much. God's judgement is at work within them and they do not realise it.

Cleansing the Conscience

When we believe in God, and the work He has done through Jesus Christ on the cross, we are accepting His salvation. Consequently, our hearts are *'sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience'* towards Him (Hebrews 10:19-22). The sprinkling spoken of here is the spiritual cleansing by the blood of Christ, that is, His death in our place (Hebrews 9:14).

The Old Testament animal sacrifices could not take away a worshipper's guilty conscience (Hebrews 9:9-10, 10:1-4). The sacrifices were designed to remind the people of their sinfulness and to feed conscience the knowledge needed to work correctly (Romans 3:19-20).

Now, under the New Covenant, through faith in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross, He cleanses

our conscience through His forgiveness of our sin (Colossians 1:21-22; 1 Peter 2:24).

Not only do we get our sins forgiven, but we are implanted (imputed) with Jesus' righteousness when we believe (Romans 4:22-24; Philippians 3:9). Because of this, God declares us not guilty and receives us as righteous (Romans 8:33-34). This is our new position in Christ: washed, innocent, and righteous.

As Christians, we need to make our behaviour match our position in Christ. It is important to keep our conscience clean in our daily living. This does NOT mean we should try to overcome our feelings of guilt by denial of our sin. Rather, we should deal with the sin that causes our guilty conscience.

When believers sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence - Jesus Christ the Righteous One (1 John 2:1-2; Hebrews 7:23-25). This does not mean that Christians can continue in sin while keeping a clear conscience (Romans 6:1-2, 15-18; Psalm 32:1-5). Do not delay in clearing your guilty conscience (Act 24:16). Sin must be dealt with quickly, otherwise your conscience will become hardened (Hebrews 3:13) as denial of sin dulls the conscience. It leads to us falling under the

slavery of sin more and more, until the conscience becomes desensitised and corrupt.

Examine yourself regularly. Hold no grudges against others, as this also affects your relationship with God (Matthew 6:14-15, 5:23-24). Full reconciliation and restitution with the person you have wronged must happen (Numbers 5:6-7; Proverbs 6:30-31; Luke 19:8; Philemon :18-19).

Only God's Word can rightly educate our conscience. Scripture is God's training truth in life (1 John 17:17; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). Cultivate your conscience according to God's Word, He will be glorified, and you will enjoy His blessing of peace.