

7 - Growing a Right Conscience

What is the conscience?

Conscience is part of our humanness, and everyone was gifted with it by the Lord at birth. However, God has entrusted the maintenance of our conscience to us. In Romans 2:15, Paul explains the two-sided operation of conscience. *They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them.* Therefore, conscience judges our thoughts and actions by the highest, or strongest, standards we know.

When we violate, or go against our conscience, it condemns us, triggering feelings of shame, regret, anxiety, and even fear. When we follow, or obey our conscience, it commends us, bringing joy, peace, self-respect, and a sense of well-being.

The role of conscience is NOT to teach us moral or spiritual values, but to hold us accountable to the highest, or most pronounced values that we have. These high values may, or may not, be right or good. But they are the values which will fire the conscience into action.

Conscience can be informed by culture, tradition, and society's values in addition to God's truth. This means, the standards society holds us to may not be God's 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 any particular food is unclean, but because the misinformed conscience tells them that it is unclean (see also 1 Corinthians 8:4-7). Because our conscience can be directed by the world's many, and often contradicting views, it is important to have a conscience that is educated by the truth of God's Word. Error, tradition, human wisdom, philosophy, and wrong moral influences can all wrongly educate and even cripple conscience (Colossians 2:6-8, 20-23).

This means conscience is educated through all sources of information, good, bad, and everything in between. The standards conscience holds us to may not necessarily be biblical or even good standards. Conscience is NOT the voice of the Holy Spirit, but it can, on occasions, be fired to levels of Holy Spirit conviction. It's possible for our conscience to become so insensitive, or even crippled, that we may become ruled by hypocrisy (1 Timothy 4:1-2; Titus 1:15). This occurs when a life becomes dominated by sin.

How efficiently our Christian conscience works is determined by two things.

First, the frequency that we take in and agree with God's truth from His written Word. This is right education of conscience.

Second, by the degree to which we obey God's truth and keep ourselves clean from sin.

Following are a few ways in which conscience operates:

Jeremiah 17:1 Conscience REMEMBERS and writes a record of wrongs in our hearts.

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.

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- 1 John 3:19-21 Conscience is a JUDGE, condemning or vindicating us before God.
- 1 Samuel 24:5 Conscience fires MEMORY, inflicting grief when we discover fault in ourselves.

Society's Weak Views Can Infect Conscience

The world has a desensitised conscience towards God and His truth (Romans 2:14-15; Psalm 36:1-2), meaning the world is not able to educate our conscience accurately with truth. At best, the worldly person compares itself with others and often concludes that it is not as bad as others. This is NOT a correct way for conscience to operate. Whereas the believer compares themselves with the law of God's Word (James 1:25) and with the character of Jesus Christ. This creates a more accurate platform from which our evaluation can fire conscience into action.

As believers, when our conscience triggers sorrow because of a wrong we have done, the correct response to this guilt is repentance and seeking forgiveness. A conscience trained by truth seeks to expose sin for what it really is - SIN (Ephesians 5:11). Whereas a worldly person prefers a more superficial approach, ignoring or silencing signals of guilt, which leads to spiritual death because sin is never dealt with (2 Corinthians 7:10). Therefore, worldly sorrow does not lead to repentance, rather, it leads to denial and justification of the wrong done and never gets cleansed (Proverbs 28:13; Mark 2:17).

Some deny the conscience freedom to operate and seek treatment for the guilt rather than repenting of their sin which may have caused the guilt. Instead of confession, repentance, reconciliation, and forgiveness, they turn to denial, self-justification, blame shifting, self-forgiveness, or anything else that could silence the conscience. This practice flows from the idea that mankind is inherently good, and just happens to occasionally do wrong. Many deny they are sinful because they see only the big crimes as sin.

Typically, today's world doesn't like the word sin to enter its thinking. Instead, sin is replaced with words like error, mistakes, superstition, or delusion. People suffering guilt from doing wrong are often regarded as victims of some past or current dilemma. This approach seeks to justify and downplay wrong behaviour as an appropriate response to being wronged by others.

Simply excusing sin away or thinking of it as an impairment or addiction fails to deal with the seriousness of what a truth trained conscience is warning of. It also fails to accept the deadly consequences of sin which is death (Romans 6:23). In this scenario, a rebellious attitude may get falsely labelled as a medical or mental health disorder. Many of our day-to-day wrong choices act out our heart's desires, which are often our sinful desires warring within us (James 4:1-3).

God's response to this:

- 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 14:12 *...each of us will give an account of himself to God.*

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Sin's effect on an unbeliever's conscience

The world has many people who deny God's existence and subsequently their own sinfulness. If people can't or won't see their sin for what it is, they will not be able to apply the only remedy God has provided for them (Mark 2:17).

Romans 1:20 and Psalm 19:1-6 tell us that God has made His existence plainly evident to everyone so that mankind is without excuse. When people choose to ignore their awareness, or conscience of God, God allows their thinking to become foolish and futile (Romans 1:21-22; Psalm 14:1).

Notice in Romans 1:18-32 how God's judgement works in the lives of people who refuse to listen to the truth God put in their hearts/conscience. God's judgment appears in three progressively worsening stages. The damage a person does against his own conscience is God's immediate judgement against them.

1. In verses 23-24, because they worship images resembling man and animals, God gives them over to sexually immoral relationships.
2. In verses 25-27, because they continued in sexual immorality while under the pretence of man-made religion, God gives them over to shameful lusts, that is, homosexuality.
3. Finally, in verses 28-32, *since they did not see fit to acknowledge God*, God gives them over to a totally depraved mind. They are now totally controlled by the sin they love. God's judgement is active within them through their evil desires and behaviour, which they love.

Read Ecclesiastes 11:9 and James 1:14-15. List below the consequences of simply doing what you want without God?

Of mankind's own natural ability, a non-Christian is not able to respond to their conscience about the existence of God in a way that would express genuine faith in Jesus Christ. For this to happen, the Holy Spirit needs to get involved, stimulating faith and repentance (Ephesians 2:8-9; 2 Timothy 2:25). Although humans have a conscience about God, the inescapable consequences of being dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1) means they are helpless without God's intervention. The fact is, it takes much more than human conscience to move a sinner, who is happy in spiritual darkness, to recognise and respond to the light of Christ (John 3:18-21).

Cleansing the conscience

When we believe that Jesus died in our place on the cross, taking the judgement for our sin, God grants us salvation. Consequently, our hearts are *sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience* towards Him (Hebrews 10:19-22). The sprinkling spoken of there is the spiritual cleansing by the blood of Christ, that is, His life being sacrificed in death on our behalf on the cross (Hebrews 9:14).

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Despite enormous effort, the Old Testament animal sacrifices could not take away the worshipper's guilty conscience (Hebrews 9:9-10, 10:1-4). This is because the law was designed to remind people of the high cost of sin and to supply their conscience with the knowledge needed to work correctly in identifying sin (Romans 3:19-20).

Now, through faith in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross, God cleanses our conscience perfectly through His cleansing and forgiveness of our sins. This is because Christ paid the death penalty we deserved (Colossians 1:19-22; 1 Peter 2:24). Not only do we get our sins forgiven, but we are implanted (imputed) with God's righteousness when we believe (Romans 4:22-24; Philippians 3:9). Because of this, God declares us innocent, and He receives us as righteous (Romans 8:33-34). This is our new position in Christ; washed, regenerated, innocent, and righteous.

Even though we enjoy a new standing before God in Christ, we are still responsible for maintaining our right living, ensuring our practice matches our position in Christ. And it is our conscience which plays an important role in this day-to-day part of Christian living. We educate our conscience through God's Word. We also check the correctness of our beliefs through prayer, Bible study, and accountability to more mature Christians, then we listen to conscience. A rightly educated conscience will warn us with guilt of sin and affirm us of right behaviour with peace and joy.

It's important to keep our conscience clear by dealing with sin that causes guilt as it occurs. Through confession and turning from sin will reset our conscience. Similarly, we should acknowledge when conscience confirms our right behaviour by praising God for His work within us.

As wonderful as conscience is, it is not a faultless mechanism, as it works with our deceitful hearts and can get caught in all kinds of traps. In the grace of God, He has provided for our safe standing before Him even when our conscience either misbehaves, or we fail to respond correctly.

When we sin, we have one who speaks to God the Father in our defence - Jesus Christ, who is our righteous one (1 John 2:1-2; Hebrews 7:23-25). This does not mean that Christians can deliberately continue in sin while maintaining a clear conscience (Romans 6:1-2, 15-18; Psalm 32:1-5). No, and God's children should not procrastinate over clearing a guilty conscience (Act 24:16). Act as soon as you become aware conscience is speaking. Sin must be dealt with quickly, otherwise your conscience will become hardened (Hebrews 3:13). Denied sin signals dulls the conscience. It leads to us falling under the slavery of sin more and more, until the conscience becomes desensitised and corrupted.

Conscience plays an important role in relationships also. If you allow your Bible educated conscience to guide your relationships, they will flow much more smoothly. Forgiveness will happen, offenses will be avoided, hurts will be reconciled, and wrongs will be put right (Numbers 5:6-7; Proverbs 6:30-31; Matthew 5:23-24; 6:14-15; Luke 19:8; Philemon :18-19).

To sum up, conscience is a brilliant part of life gifted by God and only Scripture can rightly educate our conscience (John 17:17; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). Let's choose to cultivate our conscience according to God's Word and we will enjoy the blessings while He will be honoured.

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