Is Your Conscience Clear?

*What points us up and keeps us looking up*

I’m sure you’ve heard those expressions people use about the conscience. You may well have used them yourself. Sayings like, ’My conscience won’t allow me to do that,’ ‘My conscience is clear,’ and, ‘He has a guilty conscience.’

This word has been used by society until recently is virtually as an extension of one’s own feelings. It’s as though by using the word ‘conscience’ they can claim a higher authority which puts them beyond question. The ‘conscience’ is their feelings stated as facts. As soon as someone mentions it, don’t you hesitate to question them any further?

These days, though, you hardly hear this word used out there. In the first aspect, we will see why. Because there we’ll note ’The conscience as a moral judgment.’

Yet, within Christianity it seems it’s being used more than ever. But the way it’s now used is usually somewhat different than in the past. In fact, the way it’s increasingly used is as many in society used to use it. We’ll consider that further under the second aspect. This is entitled, ’The conscience as the spiritual freedom.’

Before we turn to the first aspect, though, we note something about ‘conscience’ in Scripture. Because for most of the Bible, it’s simply not mentioned. The particular Greek word occurs some 30 or so times in the New Testament. Of the times it occurs, all are in the New Testament letters.* This is a point we will have to come back to later, because it is showing us a connection with the completed work of Christ and its effects.

The other thing to note at this point is the meaning of the Greek word. It comes from the root word meaning, ‘to share in the knowledge of a thing.’ In the Bible, this naturally means a joint knowledge held in common with God. So the conscience cannot truly be apart from God’s will. That’s why the conscience is defined as a moral faculty, given by God, through which He speaks to us.

The conscience is vital. We have to give it the best possible respect. It is through the conscience that we can know what God has to say to us personally about our relationship with Him.

1. **The conscience as a moral judgment**

The conscience as a moral judgment was the point of Romans chapter 2. There we see what is essentially a pre-conversion conscience, as this passage tells us that God’s general revelation of Himself as good and demanding goodness confronts everyone with moral responsibility. For the Jews the divine demands were made clear in the Law. And for the Gentiles it showed as they did what ‘by nature’ they knew they had to do.

**Everyone has this conscience**

Every one of us has this conscience. It tells us inwardly that we have done wrong. Calvin called it the ‘*sensus divinitatis*’ – the sense of the divine. Everyone’s conscience points them to God’s character and will. You can see why the conscience is often seen as a power separate from a person himself.

Romans 2 verse 15 speaks of it as bearing witness. In other words, our thoughts accuse us. You think about it. Even if you are unsure of your faith right now, you will need to acknowledge that you
too share this aspect of conscience. You cannot deny that there’s a little voice inside your head upsetting you when you know you’ve done wrong.

One of William Shakespeare’s most fascinating characters is Lady Macbeth. Having heard a prophecy that her husband would become king, she convinced him to assassinate the reigning monarch.

When the bloody deed was done, Macbeth was conscience-stricken. His wife told him off for his squeamishness and helped him cover up the crime. Her husband was crowned king. But that wasn’t the end. For Lady Macbeth’s initial resolve turned to remorse. She became mentally unstable. One sign of that was her constant hand-washing. ‘Will these hands ne’er be clean?’ she asked. And finally, the guilt drove her to suicide.

Lady Macbeth had crossed a moral boundary. And once you know that, doesn’t it bug you?

**Many dull this conscience**

The conscience can be dulled, however. The apostle Paul speaks of this to Timothy. In chapter 4 verse 2 of his first letter to him, he describes how some men are so bad that their consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.

Titus 1 verse 15 also picks up this same thought. It speaks of how those who are impure have had both their minds and consciences corrupted.

Now, you think of situations in Scripture when consciences were really, really dulled. Aren’t they terribly sinful situations? Because you automatically think of such things as Sodom and Gomorrah. The people there seemed to have been deprived of any morals whatsoever!

Can you see now why I said earlier that the word ‘conscience’ is hardly used in society today? The world around us has so dulled itself that it doesn’t even have a moral framework any more. There’s no need to even justify your feelings with the word ‘conscience’!

Yet, in the words of Clarence McCartney, ‘There is no grave deep enough permanently to bury evil. It must have its resurrection. The man who has done wrong has a serpent hibernating in his heart. For months, for years, it won’t show any sign of life. But one day it will lift its head and strike. The evil deed has been hidden, the sin buried, for years; but suddenly it will have a fearful resurrection. The smallest trifle will suffice to call the sin out of its grave – the stirring of a leaf, the murmur of water, the sound of a voice, the sight of a face, the pronunciation of a name or a number – and lo! The graves are opened, and the ghosts of our former transgressions come forth to accuse us to our faces!’

**The way this conscience speaks**

This is why the gospel is so important. For even if men are not brought to faith in Christ through it, the preaching and teaching of it has an important influence on society. Because of sin, conscience is unreliable.

It’s like the 12-year-old boy who was caught stealing a watch. He told police that previously he had shoplifted a gift for his mother, and he felt he had to do the same for his dad. He was now a bit upset that he wouldn’t be able to do the same for his dad – but he had no qualms about stealing!

Because of sin, conscience is unreliable. It needs a continual adjustment. This tells us the importance of a biblical standard for society. Every person ought to know when they’ve broken any one of God’s commandments. It has to get to them in the end if they’ve done wrong, as it did for Lady Macbeth.

The story is told of a man who killed another man in 1971. Even though he was the prime suspect in the murder, no one could prove it. The case was abandoned. Many thought he’d got away with it. But, you know, he hadn’t. Nearly three decades later, in failing health and living in a nursing home, he confessed to the crime.
A detective who headed the original investigation said, ‘He was looking over his shoulders for the last 26 years, not only for the law, but for his Maker. I think he wants to clear his conscience before he meets his Maker – or try at least.’

How is your conscience today? Is it clear or clouded? What would it take to be ready to meet your Maker? How can you be made clean?

These are questions each of us must answer. But they’re also questions we should be able to put to the unbelievers around us.

2. The conscience as the spiritual freedom

Firstly we saw the conscience as a way of moral judgment upon what someone has done. This is painful and absolute because the judgment is divine. But, secondly, the conscience also acts as witness and guide in all aspects of the believer’s sanctification.

The positive conscience

This is a positive aspect. For now it’s divine love coming through – not divine condemnation.

When warning against false teachers of the law in 1st Timothy chapter 1, Paul said that they must be opposed because they weren’t doing God’s work. He said that God’s work must be by faith. In verse 5 there he wrote,

‘The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere heart.’

You see, because of what Jesus Christ has done on the cross, the believer now stands cleansed before God. Hebrews 10 verse 19 says that Christ shed His blood so that we would be forgiven and made clean inside. So, because of what He’s done, verse 22 continues, you can have a clear conscience and can ‘draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.’

This is the conscience which doesn’t lock you up, but instead frees you up! No matter who you are or what you’ve done, Jesus Christ gives you a clear conscience. You can confess your sins and be right with your Maker!

That’s a privilege few out there have. And it’s a privilege you have so that the other also may be freed up. This is what we read in 1st Corinthians chapter 8. Because the development of each believer’s conscience will vary. Just as the world’s sense of conscience will differ according to their knowledge of God’s law, so there’s a similar parallel amongst believers.

The good conscience

That’s why the apostle speaks about being sensitive to where other Christians are at. Not because you are compromising your faith, but because you are able to have the maturity to help them continue to grow in the faith. The conscience needs to be nurtured.

For the Christians in Corinth, it meant thinking of their fellow believers, because they had a big problem with selfishness. We see that later in chapter 11 with the Lord’s Supper.

You might be wondering here how you can tell when you need to be considerate this way. It would be ridiculous that we have to take account of everyone’s special little quirks. Some of those behaviours can be quite sinful!

Well, this illustration may help. There was a man who was getting ready to attend a banquet. He wanted to put on a white shirt he had worn on a previous occasion, so he was inspecting it carefully to see if it was too dirty.

His wife noticed what he was doing. She called out, ‘Remember, dear, if it’s doubtful, don’t.’ The issue was settled. The man threw the shirt into the laundry basket.
The principle is the same in regards to questionable matters of conscience. If doubtful, don’t. This is what Paul meant. He further wrote about the same thing in Romans 14. He indicates there that if you have any doubts about whether an action is right or wrong and you do it anyway, you’re not doing it out of faith. Then it’s a sin, as verse 23 there says.

As well as this, the apostle says that it’s wrong to do anything by which a brother in Christ falls. The goal of love means that you don’t violate their conscience. Indeed, another apostle, Peter, says that the way we live our lives must show you have a clear conscience.

**What helps the good conscience?**

The next thing we have to consider, though, is what helps us to keep this good conscience and to make it even better. That’s where Peter earlier in his first letter helps us. In chapter 2 verse 19, he speaks about being conscious of God.

So it’s through our study of God’s Word and our communion with Him in prayer that we grow in this. And that’s reinforced through our Bible Study groups and the worship services on Sunday. In fact, someone said that it’s by meeting God in the right way on the Lord’s Day that we especially mature this way.

You might be thinking that this is quite an odds with much of what’s happening in Christendom today. Indeed, as indicated earlier, the view of conscience formerly found in the world has now become popular in the church.

A recently published book highlighted this. It is a book by Ron Sider entitled, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*. He shows how much Christians have taken on the world’s view of things. They have become materialistic and greedy. They have set their roots down here below. That’s the message they have confirmed to them from their pulpits. So much so that it affects their conscience.

This was the very issue the apostle Paul raised in the early church. For as soon as the concept of ‘The conscience as the spiritual freedom’ is watered down, or goes altogether, you are only left with ‘The conscience as a moral judgment.’ Because you can dull the conscience as the spiritual freedom, just as you can dull the conscience as a moral judgment. And while Christians will always be left with the conscience as a moral judgment, that’s not what the Lord has done through Jesus Christ for them.

**Those with the good conscience**

Friend, do you have a ‘good’ conscience? Would you be standing there next to Daniel when he read the decree of King Darius that for thirty days no prayer should be offered but to Darius himself? Would you be standing next to John the Baptist when he was confronted with the terrible and most public sin of Herod and Herodias?

It wouldn’t have taken much for either of these two to have just bent a little so that they could still have a Christian influence in their societies. But they were conscience-bound. Their relationship with the Lord meant they were looking up – not down!

It’s this good conscience which stands out in the history of the church. It’s clear in how John Bunyan responded. When he was arrested under Charles II all he had to do to escape prison was to sign a paper saying he wouldn’t preach in public. And then, during those twelve years imprisonment, at any time he could’ve got out by simply signing that.

You would have thought that Bunyan would have felt for the needs of his family. He had a dependent wife and little children. One of those children was a girl who was blind.

That weighed heavily on him. But something weighed much heavier still. As he wrote near the end of his imprisonment,
‘Unless I am willing to make of my conscience a continual slaughter shop and butchery; unless I am willing to pluck out my eyes and let the blind lead me, then God Almighty being my witness and my defence – if it shall please him to let frail life last that long – the moss shall grow upon these eyebrows before I surrender my principles or violate my conscience.’

Dear friend, is your conscience just as clear? Are you so connected with the Lord that it really hurts you when you hurt Him?

Or have you got that hidden sin? The one only you know about – apart from the Lord! The one you wouldn’t even want your closest friend to know about!

Well, your conscience has to bug you about it. And if you’ve dulled your conscience to the extent it doesn’t bug you, don’t think it isn’t still there! Out of sight is not out of mind. In fact, one day it’s going to really get to you. If not in this world then certainly in the world to come!

Please come clean with the Lord. Plead upon the blood of Christ which alone frees you. Then you will see what a difference your life will be. But most of all it’s the Lord Himself that you will more clearly see!

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Note:

* The one time it seems to appear in a gospel – in John 8:9 – it is not found in the original manuscript but is a later scribal addition. Check the NIV footnotes for further details regarding this.