

PART 1
CONSCIENCE AS GUIDE

THE INNER VOICE

‘I knew it was the right thing to do.’

‘I feel awful about what I said to her.’

‘I have written this email to him. But part of me feels it would be wrong to send it.’

‘Don’t do that. You know it would be wrong.’

NONE OF THESE SPEAKERS uses the word *conscience*. But each one is talking about it. It is a neglected word. If we think about it at all, it may be in the context of ‘prisoners of conscience’, men and women in prison because they refuse to compromise on what is a matter of conscience for them: admirable yes, but it seems far removed from most of our experience. Or perhaps we think of some great ‘issue of conscience’ in medical ethics or Parliament. Or in history we may come across ‘conscientious objectors’ who refused to fight at a time of war. In short, conscience feels like the stuff of exceptional cases.

But what about the idea that each of us should examine our consciences as part of the daily discipline of life? This is not

something that many of us take seriously today. My aim is to get you thinking about your conscience again. I want you to take it out of the cupboard, dust it off, bring it back into daily life and rediscover its power to do you good.

So what exactly is the conscience? Here are three ingredients which together help us to understand what the Bible means by conscience.

What does conscience mean?

Self-awareness

At the lowest level, conscience means an awareness of myself. It is very similar to consciousness, that uniquely human ability for 'I' to think about 'me'. This is the origin of the word. *Conscience* is a word that came into English from Latin. It means something like a knowledge ('... science') that is shared ('con...', meaning 'with'). The family of Greek words translated as 'conscience' in the New Testament have the same origin: the main word is *syneidēsis*, where *eidēsis* means 'knowledge' and *syn* means 'with, or shared'. The Old English word (technically Middle English) was *inwit*, where *wit* means something like 'knowledge' or 'judgment' (rather as we speak about our wits) and *in* points to the inwardness of it. At the most basic level, conscience means an inward knowledge, a self-awareness, a knowledge shared inwardly with myself. It is to do with self-knowledge.

Moral self-awareness

But the meaning of a word comes not just from its origins.¹ Both in the New Testament and also in English, conscience has the sense not just of self-awareness, but of *moral* self-awareness, an awareness within myself about right and wrong. So the *Oxford English Dictionary* begins one of the meanings of the word as follows:

The internal acknowledgement or recognition of the moral quality of one's motives and actions; the sense of right and wrong as regards things for which one is responsible . . .

The New Testament includes this sense in its use of the word.

There is no separate word for *conscience* in the Old Testament, but the idea is still there and is often expressed by the word *heart*, which includes this intellectual dimension. Conscience makes me aware in my mind that *this* is right and *that* is wrong. Conscience takes the universal principles of right and wrong that I know, and applies them to my particular circumstances. For example, I know it is right to honour my parents. So, when my elderly parents need me to do some shopping for them, my conscience deduces for me that it would be right to help them if I can. That is a trivial example. Others are much more difficult, especially when there seems to be a clash of obligations. Conscience begins with thinking about what would be right to do, with making reasoned judgments about what is right and wrong behaviour.

Moral self-awareness that touches my affections and my will

But conscience is more than merely intellectual. The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition continues by describing conscience as 'the faculty or principle which pronounces upon the moral quality of one's actions or motives, approving the right and condemning the wrong'.

As well as helping me know the right thing to do, my conscience makes me feel bad if I do the wrong thing and feel at peace if I do the right thing. It makes me averse to wrong and drives me towards good. It touches my affections and my will. We all know what it is to feel bad about having done something we believe to be wrong or to feel good about something we did that was right. Conscience is not just a logical conclusion; it exerts a moral force and may even be thought of as a kind of voice inside me, 'telling' me what to do. That is why this chapter is headed 'the inner voice'.

One of the ways in which conscience does this is by making me feel that my knowledge of right and wrong is shared. In particular I feel that it is shared with God: I know this particular thing would be wrong, and God knows that I know it would be wrong. This gives to my conscience a particular force. The Bible uses it in this sense, as something God has placed within human beings to give them a sense of right and wrong. The apostle Peter uses the word in this sense when he writes to Christian slaves that ‘it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God’ (literally, ‘they have conscience of God’ or, as one commentator puts it, ‘for conscience toward God’²) (1 Peter 2:19); they bear up because they know it is the right thing to do. Augustine spoke of it as ‘the inner part of man in relation to God’, whether it be ‘man’s religious organ, man’s antenna into the divine sphere, the hub of man’s readiness to receive impulses from the supernatural and the transcendent, [or] man’s divine nucleus.’³

The theologian J. I. Packer writes that for the sixteenth-century Reformers, ‘Conscience signified a man’s knowledge of himself as standing in God’s presence (*coram Deo* in Luther’s Latin phrase), subject to God’s word and exposed to the judgment of God’s law.’⁴ Milton described it in his poem *Paradise Lost* as God’s ‘umpire’ within people.⁵

We shall take conscience to include all three of these elements. It is a self-awareness, a reflective faculty within myself that enables me to reflect upon myself. Specifically, it enables me to think about the rightness or wrongness of my words, actions and thoughts. And, because I have some sense that this awareness of right and wrong may have something to do with God, it tends to make me averse to wrong and want to do right. That is to say, it pushes or pulls my will. It is my inner voice.

It is helpful to focus on some specific features of conscience.

Five features of conscience

1. *Conscience speaks with a voice that is independent of me*

‘I want to buy that car, but I feel uneasy about whether it would be right.’

‘I really enjoyed that relationship, but something inside me feels wrong about it.’

Notice about this self-awareness that these feelings seem to be – at least to some extent – independent of me. That is to say, I get them when I don’t want them. Suppose for the sake of example that I am thinking of doing something really selfish with my money. I have just received an inheritance, or a bonus from my work, and I am thinking of using all of it to buy something I want, something that is completely unnecessary and entirely self-centred. I really want this item. And yet I find something like a little voice inside me saying, ‘Isn’t that a really selfish thing to do? Don’t you think there is something better you could do with the money? You could give some of it away, or share it with your family, you know.’ I don’t want to hear that little voice. Frankly, it annoys me. And yet it is there. J. I. Packer says that ‘conscience is largely autonomous in its operation. . . . It normally speaks independently of our will, and sometimes, indeed, contrary to our will. And when it speaks, it is in a strange way distinct from us.’⁶

Conscience can be a very powerful and unsettling voice. Guilty criminals have given themselves up to the police because of conscience. Political prisoners have endured torture because of it. Guilt-ridden individuals have been driven to despair because of it. Martyrs have faced death with joy because of conscience. Here is a voice that we cannot ignore.

2. Conscience speaks with a voice that looks forwards and backwards

‘I wish I hadn’t told that lie. I feel so awful about it now.’
 ‘It would be so much easier to tell that little lie. But something inside me tells me I oughtn’t to do it.’

Secondly, this tiresome little ‘voice’ (if we may call it that) speaks to me both about things I have already done and about things I am thinking of doing. Looking backwards, it passes an internal judgment upon the past, telling me that this was right or that was wrong. But it doesn’t wait to speak until I have decided and acted; it begins speaking to me while I am in the process of deciding, reasoning and arguing with me that this would be the right thing to do or that would be the wrong thing to do. It both passes retrospective judgments and also acts as a guide for future choices.

3. Other people can appeal to my conscience

‘Sure. You can walk out on me. But you know very well it’s the wrong thing to do.’
 ‘It’s a hard call, I know, and it will cost you a lot. But you know it’s the right thing to do.’

Other people know that the little voice is there inside me. And sometimes they appeal to it against me. ‘You know that would be wrong,’ they say, despite my having told them I propose to do it. Or they may say, ‘You knew it was wrong’, contradicting my attempts to justify my action. They appeal to what I ‘know’ (that is, ‘know’ in my conscience) against what I actually do, or have done, and what I say. My conscience is like a disloyal part of my own army, ready to fight against me when

it disagrees with me and to make my life miserable when I disagree with it.

So when Paul is teaching the church in Rome to honour the civil authorities, he says, ‘it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience’, or as we might paraphrase it, ‘because you know it’s the right thing to do’ (Romans 13:5).

There is an almost light-hearted little example of this in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes, one of the so-called ‘Wisdom Books’ of the Bible. Here the wise man says to us:

‘Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you’ (Ecclesiastes 7:21). Most of us don’t have servants today, but we understand what he is saying. Don’t listen at the keyhole. Don’t peek at their emails. Don’t look at their Facebook pages or what they tweet. If you do, you will probably hear them say some unflattering things about you. The friend who smiles sweetly when she meets you for coffee may say bad things about you to her boyfriend later. If you get to hear it, you will be upset.

So we ask, why shouldn’t I listen in to the conversations of others? Here is the answer: ‘. . . for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others.’ The expression ‘you know in your heart’ means pretty much the same as ‘your conscience tells you . . .’, ‘you are aware within yourself that . . .’. You know, if you are honest with yourself, that there are plenty of times when you have smiled sweetly at someone while behind their back saying some pretty bad things about them. And maybe you are their friend, up to a point. You know that you don’t always mean what you say, or not as strongly as you say it. So remember

*My conscience is like
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that other people are just like you. Just as they probably don't fully mean the things they say to your face, so they may not fully mean all the nasty things they have said behind your back. So when I am getting on my high horse, indignant about that nasty thing someone said about me, the writer appeals to 'what I know in my heart' to persuade me to get off my high horse and admit that I'm not as consistent as all that myself.

We need to remember that, although someone may appeal to what they suppose we 'know' to be right or wrong, we may not agree with them. 'I'm glad Osama bin Laden was killed the way he was,' says someone, 'I know it was the right thing for someone to do.' But another person may have misgivings and not be so sure. (We will be thinking more in later chapters about what happens when your conscience and my conscience disagree.)

4. God can appeal to my conscience

A man was once asked to write an essay about a great preacher. He thought about people like John the Baptist or the apostle Peter, or some of the great figures of church history such as George Whitefield or John Chrysostom. But in the end he wrote about 'another preacher, known in all the corners of the earth, heard by every generation since the creation of man, one who has access into kings' palaces and behind locked doors. And the preacher he wrote about was Conscience.'⁷

The Bible says that God appeals to our consciences. There is a vivid example of this in the book of Isaiah. To persuade the people they are in the wrong, Isaiah tells a story about a farmer who planted a vineyard. The soil was good and all the preparations were exemplary. But the grapes were sour. So whose fault was it? It wasn't the farmer's fault. The problem was the bad quality of the vines.

After telling the story, Isaiah says,

Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah,
judge between me and my vineyard.

What more could have been done for my vineyard
than I have done for it?
When I looked for good grapes,
why did it yield only bad?
(Isaiah 5:3–4)

The hearers of the story are invited to pass judgment in favour of the vineyard farmer and against the vineyard; clearly, they are supposed to say, the fault lay with the vineyard rather than with the farmer.

But then at the end of the account we discover that the vineyard in the story is the people who are listening (Isaiah 5:7). God is appealing to them to pass judgment against themselves! He is saying, ‘Admit that I’m in the right and you are in the wrong. Make the judgment against yourselves.’ He is appealing to what they know to be right in their hearts; to their consciences. ‘You know you’re in the wrong; your consciences tell you that, even though you don’t want to admit it, so stop pretending you’re in the right.’

Thomas Aquinas called conscience ‘a man’s judgment of himself, in line with God’s judgment of him’. The Puritans spoke of conscience as more than this, indeed as God’s watchman and spokesman in the soul, ‘God’s spy in our bosoms’, ‘God’s sergeant he employs to arrest the sinner’, ‘God’s deputy and vice-regent within us’. We shall have to look carefully at the question of whether conscience is the voice of God or not.

5. I do not need a Bible to hear the voice of my conscience

Here is an extract from a conversation about a criminal trial:

‘It wasn’t his fault. He never had parents to tell him it was wrong to do what he did. His dysfunctional childhood and social deprivation meant he didn’t know it was wrong.’

‘You don’t need parents to know that it was wrong. Everybody knows that rape is wrong.’

Another feature of these feelings is that they are not – or not entirely – dependent on somebody telling me what is right and what is wrong. At least some of the time, I don't need a law code from God to know that something is wrong. For example, we rather assume that everybody everywhere knows that murder, rape and kidnapping are wrong.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes about some Gentiles 'who do not have the law' – that is, the law of Moses, the Ten Commandments, and so on – and yet do at least some of the things required by the law, 'their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them' (Romans 2:14–15).⁸ They do have a conscience, even if they don't have the biblical law.

In the Bible we see this in two ways. First, we see it among God's people in the period before God gave them the Ten Commandments. For the first part of the Bible story (from the start through to Exodus 20), God hasn't given people any laws. Well, that's not quite true. In the garden in Eden (in Genesis 2 and 3), he does tell Adam not to eat the fruit of one particular tree (Genesis 2:16–17). But apart from that, there aren't really any laws, and there is certainly no law code that spells it out in detail. And yet even in that early time, the Bible suggests that people had some sense of right and wrong.

A classic example is when Joseph was a slave in Egypt. He has been promoted to be household manager for a rich Egyptian called Potiphar. Potiphar is away from the house during the day on business and he leaves Joseph in charge. And then Potiphar's sexually frustrated wife tries to seduce him. Joseph refuses, saying, 'How . . . could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?' (Genesis 39:9). Joseph knows it would be wrong. His conscience tells him. How does he know? You may say perhaps he knew because Egyptian law codes told him, or because in his childhood his parents had told him. Both of those may be true, and probably are. The influence of parents on the early formation of our consciences is very significant indeed.⁹ But it still leaves

the question of how law codes or parents knew it was wrong. Later we shall need to look closer at how our consciences are formed and the role of culture and upbringing in shaping them, but for the moment let's just note that this inner moral voice seems to be present, at least to some extent, in everybody, and has been throughout history. As Christians would say, conscience is part of the residue of the image of God in humankind.

The second way the Bible speaks of this sense of right and wrong is by condemning foreign nations for their evil. A classic example of this is at the start of the prophecy of Amos. The first two chapters take a tour of the nations around the edge of God's people Israel, telling us what they've done and why they must be punished. So, for example, the people of the Philistine city of Gaza 'took captive whole communities and sold them to Edom'. They captured a whole ethnic group and sold them as slaves. And so they must be punished. Then Edom is condemned for warfare, for slaughtering men and women, 'because his anger raged continually and his fury flamed unchecked'. In our terms, he used disproportionate force. Ammon is condemned because he 'ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to extend his borders'. In our terms, they waged offensive war and committed war crimes. The point is that none of these nations had been given the Ten Commandments. But they didn't need them to tell them that these kinds of things were wrong. They knew they were wrong; their consciences told them they were wrong, and so they could quite fairly be punished for doing them.

We will return later to this question of the extent to which everybody knows right from wrong when we think about how our consciences can be distorted, hardened and even brutalized. And it is sadly true that some people have been so traumatized, and are so dysfunctional because they have been abused, that their consciences hardly seem to operate at all. But for the moment the point is that, even for these people, there is some vestige left of a sense of right and wrong.

So what is conscience?

Conscience is our self-awareness, particularly about right and wrong. It is the faculty within us that enables us to distinguish between them. It pushes us away from wrong and pulls us towards right. It is a voice within us that can speak with a strange independence from us. It looks both forwards and backwards. Others can appeal to it when trying to persuade us to behave well. And repeatedly in the Bible God himself appeals to it. Although we shall see later that our consciences are not reliable, there is a residual sense in which we have a conscience, whether or not we have a Bible.

Questions for personal study or discussion

1. What experience do you have of your conscience making you feel clean and good about something you have done? Try to think of specific examples.
2. When has your conscience made you feel awkward or uneasy about something you are thinking of saying or doing? Again, think of particular examples.
3. Have you ever appealed to someone else's conscience to persuade them to do, or not to do, something? Can you think of examples?
4. Do you agree that everybody has a conscience, however they were brought up and whatever their culture?

5. Do you think that conscience is the voice of God within you? Why? Or why not?

Notes

1. This is to say, etymology (a word's derivation) cannot determine meaning. For example, a 'cupboard' is not a 'board' upon which you may put a 'cup', even if it may once have meant that.
2. E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (Macmillan, 1969), p. 176.
3. Philip Bosman, *Conscience in Philo and Paul* (Mohr Siebeck, 2003), p. 17.
4. J. I. Packer, *Among God's Giants: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Kingsway, 1991), p. 141.
5. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book III, lines 194–195: 'And I will place within them as a guide my Umpire Conscience.'
6. Packer, *Among God's Giants*, p. 144.
7. David Watson, *Know Yourself* (IVP, 1964), p. 3.
8. These are a difficult pair of verses. For another understanding of them see Christopher Ash, *Teaching Romans* (Christian Focus, 2009), vol. I, pp. 101–104; or, for a more technical discussion of the Greek, C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, International Critical Commentary (T. & T. Clark, 1975), vol. I, pp. 159–163.
9. Freud noted this, and although he overstated it, it is still true.