

## HONESTY, MORALITY AND CONSCIENCE

### INTRODUCTION:

1. It seems easy to say, “Of course everyone can be honest - at least most of the time in the big things.” But why not all of the time, and in the little things also?
2. We cannot assume that honesty is a way of life in our country - or in our churches. The forces of society have subtly squeezed us into new definitions of honesty, morality, and ethics. Absolutes of right and wrong have largely disappeared and have been replaced by a fuzzy, gray fog of inconsistent moral choices.
3. Clare Boothe Luce has written:  

“Today, ever-growing numbers of individuals feel fewer and fewer restraints or inhibitions against disobeying any law or moral code that interferes with their private desires or impulses. As the social stigmas that were once attached to lawbreaking and deviation from the traditional morals grow weaker, the distinction between liberty and license becomes more and more blurred in the mind of the individual. Pleasure and profit become the only guides to personal conduct. ‘The law’ is seen as an enemy to be destroyed or outwitted. In the end, the only ‘sin’ is ‘getting caught’.”
4. God’s Law Requires Complete Honesty.
  - A. Ps. 51:6: “Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom.”
  - B. Eph. 4:25: “Therefore, putting away lying, each one speak truth with his neighbor, for we are members of one another.”

### I. IS OUR CONSCIENCE A FRIEND OR FOE?

- A. Many people view their conscience - as a fun-killer, an irritating voice warning them not to do something, an inexplicable feeling to be repressed, tricked, or ignored.
  - B. The conscience speaks at awkward times. It unsettles the best thought-out plans. It prevents restful sleep. Years after an act has been committed or a word spoken, the conscience persists in reviving the memory of that deed. A day rarely passes without the conscience attacking some issue of inner thought or outward action.
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C. Some Valid Questions Need to be Asked About Our Conscience:

1. Is the conscience Biblical?
2. Can Satan use it?
3. Is the conscience of a Christian the same as that of a non-Christian?
4. What if the Scriptures and my conscience are in conflict?
5. Can I train my conscience to respond differently?
6. If my conscience has been "seared" through past sin, can it ever be made tender again?

D. God's Law Is Our Counselor for Our Conscience.

1. Prov. 12:15: "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but he who heeds counsel *is* wise."
2. Prov. 13:10: "By pride comes only contention, but with the well-advised *is* wisdom."
3. Prov. 11:14: "Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety."
4. Psalms 1:1: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful."
5. Heb. 13:7: "Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct."

II. GOD USES OUR CONSCIENCE TO GIVE US DIRECTION AND TO MAKE CHOICES.

- A. Acts 24:16: The apostle Paul said, "This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men."
- B. Rom. 2:15: Describing unbelievers Paul said, "their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them."
- C. Definition: The English word "conscience" comes from the Latin conscientia. The prefix con means "with" or "together". The verb scire, from which the second

part of the word is derived, means “to know”. Then the word means “to know with” or “to know together.”

∅ The Greek word used in the New Testament is suneidesis. It means to know or to agree with.

CRUX Thus: A valid conscience requires a knowledge of God's word, and to agree with God on what constitutes right and wrong.

### III. THE BIBLE MAKES IT PLAIN THAT OUR CONSCIENCE BEARS WITNESS.

- A. Rom. 2:14-15: Paul said of the Gentile world: “For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things contained in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them.”
1. There was an inner law written in their hearts.
  2. The conscience “bears witness” between an outward action and the inner law.
    - a. The conscience is a witness of our actions and thoughts.
    - b. “Bearing witness” is a present tense verb and shows that the conscience is active at all times.
- B. Rom. 9:1: Paul said: “I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness, in the Holy Spirit.”

Note: His conscience accurately and faithfully witnessed the rightness of his words and actions.

### IV. OUR CONSCIENCE BOTH ACCUSES AND EXCUSES.

- A. Rom. 2:15: The thoughts of the Gentiles were “alternately accusing or else defending them.”
- B. 2 Cor. 1:12: Paul said that his conscience testified that his actions among the Corinthians was above reproach: “For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly

wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you.”

C. Conscience May Convict Even When an Act Does Not Appear Morally Wrong.

1. Example: David’s Numbering the People.

- a. There was nothing morally wrong in the numbering.
- b. Yet, David’s heart (conscience) troubled him.
- c. He concluded, “I have sinned greatly in what I have done; but now, I pray, O Lord, take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly.” (2 Sam. 24:10).

Note: God did not want David and Israel to depend upon numbers but upon Him.

Though an action may seem entirely permissible legally and morally, God may force our conscience to instruct us not to do it.

2. Adam Smith wrote: “What can be added to the happiness of a man who is healthy, who is out of debt, and who has a clear conscience.”

D. The Conscience Judges Our Actions - It Passes Judgment.

1. The conscience cannot act, but only passes judgment. It compares our deeds or our words or our thoughts or our whole being with the moral law, with the will of God. And then pronounces judgment, that is, decides whether we are in conformity or in conflict with the will of God.

2. This Judgment By Our Conscience May Be Viewed in Four Ways:

- a. This judgment is final and unbiased. The conscience does not reconsider the evidence - it simply makes the final judgment. It is unbiased in that it takes the information given to it and pronounces the verdict. It may not always be right, but it is final in any given situation at any particular point in time.

- b. The conscience is irrefutable, absolute, and unappealable. Once having spoken, the conscience

cannot be convinced, cajoled, or commanded to change its ruling. The conscience may grow stronger, or be seared, or turned more to God, and thus be altered later. But, right now, for this act, it is unappealable.

c. The conscience is categorical. That is, it gives its judgment and supplies no reasons. It does not explain why it judges an action in a particular way, but says only that the action is right or wrong.

d. The conscience is individual. One man's conscience will not judge the same way as another's. It speaks only to one individual, not to anyone else, and it is influenced by many teachings and experiences unique to that person. This influence, of course, can be positive when the conscience is exposed to the higher law of God as revealed in the Bible.

## V. THE FUNCTION OF THE CONSCIENCE IS AN ON-GOING PROCESS.

### A. It Speaks to Us Before a Contemplated Action Is Begun.

1. The conscience attempts to communicate whether the action would be right or wrong. At this point, the battle is in the mind. The conscience wrestles with a confusion of proposals, reasons, impulses, and motives. How strongly it speaks is much influenced by information that has been fed to our mind and by what we have been thinking about most.
2. This is the point at which the battle for purity, morality, and honesty must be fought and won. What is harbored in the mind will soon become an action when the opportunity presents itself, so the conscience needs an opportunity to speak before an action takes place.

### B. Conscience Speaks to Us During an Action.

1. It is at this point that conscience is usually at its weakest level of influence. We become so involved in what we are doing that we are insensitive to the cries of conscience. We may hear it, but rush forward with the action while making some weak rationalization in our minds.
2. Once an act of wrong has begun, stopping is extremely difficult. Momentum, desire, and the intensity of the moment seem to overrule any reversal. But it can be done.

At this point the will must overcome the desire. We cannot discount our conscience even when involved in the worst of acts.

C. Conscience Speaks to Us After an Action.

1. Conscience speaks loudest after an act has been completed, as it pronounces judgment on the act. Our conscience urges us to make restitution for the action.
2. The desire to escape results naturally when we sin and our conscience speaks. We shun God's presence until we have obeyed the urgings of our conscience. Maintaining fellowship with God is closely related to keeping a clear conscience.

VI. OUR CONSCIENCE IS THE JUDGE OVER:

A. Our Words:

1. What we say and how we say it. We are judges according to the truthfulness, love, and kindness expressed through our communications to others.

B. Our Thoughts:

1. The conscience works on recurring, persistent thoughts and thought patterns which are neither temporary nor harmless. They can soon become dominant thought patterns that quickly result in wrong actions.

C. Our Attitudes:

1. Attitudes are our inner feelings or opinions about things. We harbor attitudes of love, hate, sympathy, bitterness, anger, unconcern, and many others. They can be healthy or unhealthy. Attitudes are one level below our conscious thoughts, but conscience has ready access to this level.

D. Our Motives:

1. Whereas our attitudes reside within us and may not result in action, motives are the direct, underlying reasons why we take particular actions.
2. A right motive may produce either a proper or improper action.

- a. Example: If a parent is correcting his child, his motive should be to prepare his child to be a godly person and a contributing citizen in society. The parent can do this by love, counsel, discipline, which are proper biblical actions. But prompted by the same motive a parent can scold, belittle, ridicule, and make unreasonable demands - improper actions which are, incidentally, unproductive.

## VII. THE CONSCIENCE MAY BE DESCRIBED IN FOUR STATES OR CONDITIONS:

### A. A Good Conscience.

1. Acts 23:1: Paul said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day."
2. 1 Tim. 1:19: Paul commanded Timothy to keep "faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck."
3. 1 Tim. 3:9: The deacons were "holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience."

### B. An Evil Conscience.

1. Heb. 10:22: The Hebrews writer said, "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."
2. Heb. 9:14: He had already said that Christ's blood will "purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God."

Note: The Greek word used for "evil" in Heb. 10:22 is poneros which denotes: "evil that causes labor, pain and sorrow."

Q An evil conscience is an uncleansed conscience not a conscience that prompts us to do evil things. As a result of unconfessed sin, the person with an evil conscience becomes more and more susceptible to sin and less sensitive to what is good.

### C. A Seared Conscience.

1. 1 Tim. 4:1-2: Paul spoke of hypocritical liars who were “having their own conscience seared with a hot iron,” and who caused others to “depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons.”
2. Eph. 4:18-19: Paul describing the Gentile world, “having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to licentiousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.
  - a. These passages describe perfectly those whose conscience has been made insensitive. Their conscience has been branded. Imagine a hot branding iron touching your skin. First you feel terrible pain, but then numbness. When the wound later heals, the scar has no functioning nerve endings to produce feeling.
  - b. Or touch a well-developed callous on your hand - you can't even feel a tickle. A seared conscience is like that. Once deeply sensitive, it was burned and destroyed by the toleration of sin, and is now insensitive. The seared conscience finally becomes silent when the same sin is committed repeatedly.
  - c. Can a seared conscience be made sensitive again? The conscience can experience healing and restoration. This regeneration process must go on until the urgings of conscience begin to agree consistently with Scripture in the areas where it has been seared. This could take a long time.
  - d. It is possible for the conscience to be seared and unreliable in one area and reliable in another - with some limitations. For example, your conscience may goad you about lying, yet be completely insensitive to sexual sin. But harboring sin in one area of your life does spill over into other areas. A conscience seared in one area will eventually be weakened in all areas.

D. A Weak Conscience.

1. 1 Cor. 8:9-12: Paul told the Corinthians, “But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the

conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.”

E. A Defiled Conscience.

1. Titus 1:15: “To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled.”

Note: The seared conscience is totally insensitive, whereas the defiled conscience is misguided by a combination of right and wrong.

F. There Are Four Factors to be Considered in Following Conscience.

1. The conscience can be insensitive or seared, and therefore incapable of giving direction.
2. It can be too tender or weak, and therefore unreliable.
3. It is not an absolute authority, since it is conditioned by background and teaching.
4. It is inadequate when used alone and must be supplemented with the influence of the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit, and godly counsel.

**VIII. WE NEED TO LEARN HOW TO RESPOND PROPERLY TO THE CONSCIENCE.**

A. The correct pattern for this process is:

1. First, we commit an act, say a word, think a thought, or harbor an attitude, or else we simply contemplate one of these actions.
2. The conscience then speaks, giving its judgment regarding the rightness or wrongness of the situation.
3. At this point, we may be tempted to analyze the situation with our minds and take action with our wills. This is the wrong approach. The next step must be to examine the Scriptures to see what they say about the issue.

4. We should seek counsel from a godly friend if we do not have clear direction at this point.
5. Finally, we must act on the basis of faith. "Whatever is not from faith is sin." (Rom. 14:23)

Note: To respond correctly to what our conscience says, we may need to make restitution to someone for what we have done, or confess something - first to God, then to others. Or we may need to stop or start doing something - such as controlling our tongue or being more helpful in the home. We may need to change an attitude about another person or situation, or forgive someone for something they have done to us. To have a clear conscience before God and man we must do whatever is necessary.

Psalm 119:11: "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You."

Mickle in his *Conscience - A Tale of Life* writes:

"This watchful auxiliary of the soul may be lulled to sleep but it can never die; it may be deadened but can never perish utterly. Happy is the man in whom it never sleeps. If it pains him, the pain is for his good; it is as a thorn to guard him from the briars of iniquity; if he disregards it, sad indeed be the after pangs and numberless the sore bruises. Let him but commit a crime: the little tell-tale conscience wakes and all happiness is gone."