Grace to You :: *esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Conscience, Revisited
Scripture: Exodus 8:15; 2 Chronicles 34:27; Psalm 7:10; Psalm 51:10; Romans 1:32; Romans 2:14–15; 1 Corinthians 8:7–12; Philippians 3:19; 1 Timothy 3:9; 1 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:15
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Drugs, therapy, entertainment—they're all used to silence a guilty conscience. But for the Christian, the conscience is the key to freedom.

In 1984 an Avianca Airlines jet crashed in . Investigators studying the accident made an eerie discovery. The "black box" cockpit recorders revealed that several minutes before impact a shrill, computer-synthesized voice from the plane's automatic warning system told the crew repeatedly in English, "Pull up! Pull up!"

The pilot, evidently thinking the system was malfunctioning, snapped, "Shut up, Gringo!" and switched the system off. Minutes later the plane plowed into the side of a mountain. Everyone on board died.

When I saw that tragic story on the news shortly after it happened, it struck me as a perfect parable of the way modern people treat guilt—the warning messages of their consciences.

The wisdom of our age says guilt feelings are nearly always erroneous or hurtful; therefore we should switch them off. But is that good advice? What, after all, is the conscience—this sense of guilt we all seem to feel?

The conscience is generally seen by the modern world as a defect that robs people of their self-esteem. Far from being a defect or a disorder, however, your ability to sense your own guilt is a tremendous gift from God. He designed the conscience into the very framework of the human soul. It is the automatic warning system that cries, "Pull up! Pull up!" before you crash and burn.

The conscience, Puritan Richard Sibbes wrote in the seventeenth century, is *the soul reflecting upon itself*. Conscience is at the heart of what distinguishes the human creature. People, unlike animals, can contemplate their own actions and make moral self-evaluations. That is the very function of conscience.

The conscience has an innate ability to sense right and wrong. Everyone, even the most unspiritual heathen, has a conscience:

When Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, *their consciences bearing witness*, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them." (Romans 2:14-15, emphasis added)

The conscience entreats you to do what you believe is right and restrains you from doing what you believe is wrong. But don't equate the conscience with the voice of God or the law of God. It is a *human* faculty that judges your actions and thoughts by the light of the highest standard you perceive. When you violate your conscience, it condemns you, triggering feelings of shame, anguish, regret, consternation, anxiety, disgrace, and even fear. Conversely, when you follow your conscience, it commends you, bringing joy, serenity, self-respect, well-being, and gladness.

The word *conscience* is a combination of the Latin words *scire* ("to know") and *con* ("together"). The Greek word for "conscience" is found more than thirty times in the New Testament—*suneidesis*, which also literally means "co-knowledge."

Conscience is knowledge together with oneself. That is to say, your conscience knows your inner motives and true thoughts. It is above reason and beyond intellect. You can rationalize, trying to justify yourself in your own mind, but a violated conscience will not be easily convinced.

The Hebrew word for conscience is *leb*, usually translated "heart" in the Old Testament. The conscience is so much at the core of the human soul that the Hebrew mind did not draw a distinction between conscience and the rest of the inner person. Thus when Moses recorded that Pharaoh "hardened his heart" (Exodus 8:15), he was saying that Pharaoh had steeled his conscience against God's will.

When Scripture speaks of a tender heart (cf. 2 Chronicles 34:27), it refers to a sensitive conscience. The "upright in heart" (Psalm 7:10) are those with pure consciences. And when David prayed, "Create in me a clean heart, O God" (Psalm 51:10), he was seeking to have his life and his conscience cleansed.

Multitudes today respond to their conscience by attempting to suppress it, overrule it, or silence it. They conclude that the real blame for their wrong behavior lies in some childhood trauma, the way their parents raised them, societal pressures, or other causes beyond their control.

Sometimes people convince themselves that their sin is a clinical problem, not a moral one—and therefore define their drunkenness, sexual perversion, immorality, or other vices as "diseases" or "conditions." To respond to the conscience with such self-excusing arguments is tantamount to telling the conscience, "Shut up, Gringo!"

It is possible virtually to nullify the conscience through repeated abuse. Paul spoke of people whose consciences were so convoluted that their "glory is in their shame" (Philippians 3:19; cf. Romans 1:32). Both the mind and the conscience can become so defiled that they cease making distinctions between what is pure and what is impure (cf. Titus 1:15).

After so much violation, the conscience finally falls silent. Morally, those with defiled consciences are left flying blind. The annoying warning signals may be gone, but the danger certainly is not; *in fact,the danger is greater than ever*.

Furthermore, even the most defiled conscience will not remain silent forever. When standing at the Judgment, every person's conscience will side with God, the righteous judge. The worst sin-hardened evildoer will discover before the throne of God that he has a conscience that testifies

against him.

The conscience, however, is *not* infallible. Nor is it a source of revelation about right and wrong. Its role is not to teach you moral and ethical ideals, but to hold you accountable to the highest standards of right and wrong you know.

Both tradition and truth inform the conscience, so the standards it holds you to are not necessarily biblical ones (1 Corinthians 8:6-9). The conscience can be needlessly condemning in areas where there is no biblical issue. In fact, it can try to hold you to the very thing the Lord is trying to release you from (Romans 14:14, 20-23)!

The conscience, to operate fully and in accord with true holiness, must be informed by the Word of God. So even when guilt feelings don't have a biblical basis, they are an important spiritual distress sign. If your conscience is misfiring—sending out signals from a weak conscience—that should spur you to seek the spiritual growth that would bring your conscience more in harmony with God's Word.

Your conscience reacts to the convictions of your mind and therefore can be encouraged and sharpened in accordance with God's Word. The wise Christian wants to master biblical truth so that the conscience is completely informed and judges right because it is responding to God's Word. A regular diet of Scripture will strengthen a weak conscience or restrain an overactive one. Conversely, error, human wisdom, and wrong moral influences filling the mind will corrupt or cripple the conscience.

In other words, the conscience functions like a skylight, not a light bulb. It lets light into the soul; it does not produce its own. Its effectiveness is determined by the amount of pure light you expose it to, and by how clean you keep it. Cover it or put it in total darkness and it ceases to function. That's why the apostle Paul spoke of the importance of a clear conscience (1 Timothy 3:9) and warned against anything that would defile or muddy the conscience (1 Corinthians 8:7; Titus 1:15).

Or, to switch metaphors, your conscience is like the nerve endings in your fingertips. Its sensitivity to external stimuli can be damaged by the buildup of calluses or even wounded so badly as to be virtually impervious to any feeling. Paul also wrote of the dangers of a calloused conscience (1 Corinthians 8:10), a wounded conscience (1 Corinthians 8:12), and a seared conscience (1 Timothy 4:2).

Psychopaths, serial killers, pathological liars, and other people who seem to lack any moral sense are extreme examples of people who have ruined or desensitized their consciences. Can such people really sin without remorse or scruples? If so, it is only because they have ravaged their own consciences through relentless immorality and lawlessness.

The conscience is an inextricable part of the human soul. Though it may be hardened, cauterized, or numbed into apparent dormancy, the conscience continues to store up evidence that will one day be used as a testimony to condemn the guilty soul. But for the Christian, the conscience is a tremendous asset of spiritual growth.

Take time each day to inform your conscience by reading God's Word. Never train yourself to ignore your conscience, but respond quickly to its warnings. And then cleanse your conscience through

consistent confession as you seek forgiveness from those you've sinned against—whether God or others. Those things will strengthen your conscience so that you can enjoy the freedom and blessings of a clear conscience before God.

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