

## Our Conscience

Most of us do have a sense that we have an inner conscience to guide us. Most of us would have a difficult time describing exactly what our conscience is. God-fearing people believe it has been given to us by God. Sometimes we seem to be quite aware of its presence and other times we have had no awareness of it at all, and in those times we probably weren't terribly concerned about its absence.

Scripture seems to describe our conscience in various ways, and it does appear to be God-given. The word "conscience" doesn't appear in the Old Testament, in the original Hebrew. Its functions are ascribed to the "heart". We are told in I Samuel 24:1-5 that King Saul pursued David into the wilderness. Saul entered a dark cave where David and his men were hiding. In the dark, David carefully cut off the hem of Saul's garment. In verse 5, we read that David's conscience bothered him, because he did that. The literal Hebrew reads, "the heart of David smote him".

The absence of the concept of an inner conscience in the OT is probably because to the Hebrew his moral code was external—the Mosaic code. Moral behavior was also frequently seen as a group thing rather than individual. The clan, or the people of Israel, sinned against God (see Joshua 7:1).

In the New Testament, Paul spoke of the conscience, although Jesus never used the word. However, Jesus did address this issue, that men needed to work toward moral wholeness: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisees, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also." He probably addressed the issue this way because a large part of his audience were Hebrews.

Paul wrote that even the lost have a God-given conscience, "For 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 conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them" (Romans 2:14,15). Paul also wrote that "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse" (Romans 1:18-20).

What God has put within us is the ability to discern right from wrong, according to God's

standard. When our conscience is working correctly, our circumstances seem “right” or “wrong” morally. We seem to “just know”, from inside. Our conscience needs to be informed so that we can apply our sense of right and wrong to life. It becomes informed and educated as we get older. So, our conscience is guided by what we know and believe to be true, as we learn from the world around us. A man who believes we are not to eat meat that has been offered to idols will have pangs of conscience if he eats that meat, even though Paul has told us that it is fine to eat such meat (1 Cor 8:8).

In the same manner, though our God-given conscience tells us that we are not to engage in premarital sex, our world tells us that it is not only permissible, but that it is the thing to do. Therefore, our conscience can be misinformed, and therefore disabled, at least in that area of life.

Our conscience needs to be fed the Word of God in an atmosphere that supports living a godly life in all of its aspects. It can be trained to be very useful to us. We must guard it against being defiled (Titus 1:15), or seared (1 Tim 4:2). The atoning work of Jesus on the cross has opened the door to any of us who wants to turn from the error that we have fed our consciences. He stands ready to wash our hearts and consciences clean (Heb 10:22). We will need to have the courage to ask Him to show us the error that our consciences have believed, so that we can then ask Him to remove it and put in its place the truth from God.

The discussion above deals with our conscience, without regard to the part the Holy Spirit plays in our lives. He is interested and eager to be involved every minute of every day in our lives, so that we can set aside most of our fears about our conscience failing us. If we purpose to enter into an active personal relationship with the Holy Spirit, and engage Him in dialogue regarding all of our life (in whatever form of dialogue that works for us), then He will guide us in the way of God\*\*. It is when we move away from our intimate fellowship with the Holy Spirit and get headstrong, and decide to go forward in our own wisdom and strength, that we find ourselves “in the flesh” and violating our conscience, and/or the will of God.

A personal example: As a retired pastor in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, I am required to go, each year, to one of the three presbytery meetings that are held each year. Recently, I was thinking about which of the meetings I would attend in 2004. I had decided to attend the one held in Wilmington, NC, because I had served that church as Interim Senior Pastor a couple of years back, and wanted to see some of my friends there.

Then, just a few days ago, I felt the Holy Spirit nudging me to take this subject up with Him, instead of just doing what I wanted. I said, “OK, Lord.” As I prayed and asked Him to show me what He had on His mind, He showed me that I was getting ready to violate my conscience. He reminded me that I had held a strong opinion that when a pastor leaves a church, he should NEVER re-enter the scene and

meddle with what is going on. I believe that God agrees with this. He also revealed to me that my REAL reason for wanting to go the meeting in Wilmington was because I wanted to get to know the new pastor (“just being friendly, don’t you know?”), and then sort of “advise” him a little bit about the ministry. After all, I had worked with those people for a year, and he hardly knew them. I was getting ready to “meddle.”

So, you see, my flesh had brought in a fleshy argument that was mis-informing my conscience (which would normally NEVER allow me to do such a thing), and was getting ready to override the normal way my conscience works, and plunge me into a serious problem. But, because I have invited the Holy Spirit to speak to me any time He wants, I have the blessing of His help with my conscience, often at very important times. When we really take as our “Life Verse” the words of Proverbs 3:5, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding”, and we ask Him to reveal to us all that this word to us is meant to bring us, we will see our desperate need to walk very intimately with the Holy Spirit.

God gave a conscience to every person, as a very useful tool intended to help us live our lives in a way that is pleasing to God. However, since we are all born with a sinful, fallen nature (Ps 51:5), and have naturally sinful hearts (Jer 17:9), we begin to corrupt our own consciences early on in our lives, as we seek to be the god of our own lives and strive to have things “our way.”

The world has had such a profound influence on the conscience of humans on this planet that, apart from the strong work of the Holy Spirit, we can’t trust our conscience entirely and we must test the leadings of our conscience, to see if what it is saying to us is really true, as God sees it. Here, we need Proverbs 3:5 again, “Trust in the Lord (the Holy Spirit and God’s Word) with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding (which includes our conscience). If we have come from a home of origin where shaming and “guilting” were done as a means of controlling our behavior, this wounded us; and out of our woundedness, we will often have a sense of guilt from our flesh about something we are planning or have done. Our misinformed consciences and the enemy will cause us to feel guilt.

In addition to the influence of this false guilt, our conscience is tainted by our fear of man (what will they think of me?), our need to be right, our need to be perfect (in order to avoid criticism), and numerous other works of the enemy and our flesh. In the case of someone who is relatively free of these deceptive influences, and who has an active relationship with the Holy Spirit, when he begins to head in a wrong direction, the Holy Spirit will “check” him, in a gentle Fatherly way, working through his conscience and directly into his spirit, showing him that this path is not the will of God.

Because of the aforementioned contamination of our conscience, we are best advised to walk intimately with the Holy Spirit. He will show us if we are off track. He convicts us of sin (John 16:8),

but without condemnation (Rom 8:1,2). When we walk intimately with the Holy Spirit, we are best able to be led by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:14,15). We should let Him be the governor of our conscience.

#### Receive from God

Once we have become confident that God really is in control of His universe, that He loves and cherishes us, and that He is going to take care of us in a way that is really good for us, we can trust Him enough to open up with enough vulnerability to receive from Him (see Trusting God). Our conviction is that Jesus is our perfect Shepherd, who makes no mistakes, and we are His sheep cared for in His pasture. He loves each one of us very passionately and very tenderly. He wants us each to grow into strong, vibrant Christians, who are His disciples, His witnesses, His warriors. His desire has always been to be “God with us”, and He has decided to accomplish that by living inside us in the person of His Holy Spirit.

He loves living inside us, where He can know our thoughts and feel our feelings. He wants us to become comfortable with really deep intimacy with Him, trusting Him with our thoughts and feelings. We began our pilgrimage with Jesus by trusting Him with our eternity and with our lives. Since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:9), we can trust the Holy Spirit just as completely as we trust Jesus. He loves us just as Jesus loves us, and because He loves us He will lovingly bring about the changes in us that we need in order to become what Jesus has designed us to be. Jesus is the Lord of the universe, and since Jesus has ascended to the Father, the Holy Spirit has been given to us as the “action-person” of the Godhead here on earth. He is now ruler and shepherd of the children of God (Mt 2:6), for the Lord Jesus. We can trust Him to act in the very same way that Jesus does.

Jesus challenged the trust of His disciples when He said, “What man is there among you, when his son shall ask him for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he shall ask for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!” (Mt 7:9-11)

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We have good reason to trust that when we ask the Lord to touch us by His Holy Spirit and give us what He knows we need, that He will do just that, and that He will protect us from any of the enemy's possible attempts to take advantage of our vulnerability before the Lord, at that moment. He will give us all the discernment we need in such a time of openness to Him. Too many Christians have a greater fear of being deceived by the enemy than they have a trust in the Lord to give them the discernment they need for their protection. They are not fully comprehending the very important role that we are supposed to give the Holy Spirit of God in our lives.

We have learned that God is "omnipresent"—that is, present everywhere. Sometimes He "manifests" His presence in ways that can be seen or felt, like when He parted the Red Sea. When we find ourselves in a worship service where the Lord has come in His "manifest presence", and we can sense He is there in power, this is wonderful and it is an opportunity to receive from the Lord. He is the one who initiates His coming in His manifest presence, and it can happen anywhere. Usually, He comes in this way in a worship service. If we are living in an attitude of fleshly self sufficiency, thinking we need nothing more from the Lord, we will probably not receive anything from Him in that moment. However, if we are living with an awareness of our great dependence upon Him, and we are hungry for His presence, we will most likely be able to receive from Him. This is a time for us to let down our "walls", and even allow ourselves to feel our love for Him emotionally (we don't normally do this, because we fear that we will have tears). When we come as His hungry children, we are in the best position to receive from Him the nourishment we need spiritually, emotionally, and even physically in a healing.

Remember the very important word to us in Proverb 3:5, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding". Our understanding is in our mind, and it tends to want to figure everything out apart from consulting the Lord. It can be very proud. God says we're to trust with our heart...listen with our heart...which is the Old Testament way to speak of our innermost part. The word "spirit" is also used in the OT for the same purpose (Ps 32:2; 51:10; Prov 20:27). The New Testament also uses the words spirit, or heart (see Gal 4:6; Heb 4:12), for our innermost being, not our physical blood-pumping organ. So, we can expect God to communicate with us into our spirit, by His Holy Spirit, and then our spirit releases understanding into our mind and our emotions. The Lord wants us to "listen" with our spirit, so His Spirit can speak into our spirit, and then we can receive His meaning in our minds. If we begin our inquiry about something that concerns us in our own supposedly self-sufficient minds, then all we will get is our own limited understanding, rather than the wealth of what God has for us.

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Most Christians have two primary hindrances to receiving from the Lord: a habit of analyzing things too much (wanting to understand everything with their minds), and a desire to be in control (so they can take care of themselves). So, while they are being prayed for, to receive from God, they are apt to be asking a rapid series of internal questions like, "Is this what I'm supposed to be feeling? Is anything happening? Is anything going to happen? Is this person who is praying for me getting tired of praying?" In addition, as the "manifest presence" of the Lord (or God's power) comes upon the person, and he/she begins to feel a bit wobbly, there will be that natural instinct to do whatever it takes to "maintain one's composure". Here is where we must just surrender to whatever the Lord is doing, trusting that He knows best, without our typical analysis (which we normally do as a means of protecting, or taking care of ourselves). This is a time to let our perfect Shepherd be in control, letting Him impart right into our spirit, soul and body whatever He wants, and letting Him take care of us, because we trust Him without any reservations.

If we do all of the above, there is a pretty good chance that we will end up "resting in the Spirit" on the floor (someone will catch us, and let us down gently). Then, if we maintain this surrender before the Lord while on the floor, we will usually experience the wonderful peace that only the Holy Spirit can give, as we lie there (remember John 14:27). We mustn't begin analyzing while on the floor either (What's happening now? Is anyone else on the floor?). We are best advised to remain hungry for the Lord's presence, desiring to fully experience Him in whatever way He chooses to come to us. We may feel His power on or in our bodies. He may go in and do a measure of healing of the hurts in our hearts, and this may cause us to cry some. We are best advised to surrender to this crying. Just let the Lord do the healing that He has in mind. He may fill us with joy, so that we experience laughter. Let it rip. Don't worry about anyone else around you.

This wonderful peace that the Lord grants at this time is a kind of spiritual anesthesia, while He does things in our souls, or our bodies. We should cherish it. We certainly can't manufacture it on our own. We should stay down on the floor as long as the Lord is pouring out the peace on us. Many people have times on the carpet (sometimes lovingly called "carpet time") for over an hour, and never have a clue what God is doing inside. This is alright. He IS doing something, you can be sure. That's why he put you down there on His operating table. Some people have experiences of knowing a lot about what He is doing. He knows when we need to know, and when it's best for us not to know. We're back to trusting Him on this matter, too.

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God usually has plans for us to meet with Him on His operating table several times, not just once. He uses these times to bring healing to the wounded places in our souls, sometimes healing to our bodies, oftentimes additional truth so that our minds can be renewed (Rom 12:2), sometimes direction for our lives, and to advance our growth as Christians, toward maturity. We would all be greatly benefited by finding a way to meet with Him additional times, in this way. God has invited us to come and experience Him in various ways, because He loves us. He is intimately aware of everything in our lives. He wants us to get to know Him more completely, and to enter more fully into an intimate relationship with Him.

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