

IS CONSCIENCE A SAFE GUIDE?

"And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." Acts 23:1.

"And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offense toward God, and toward men." Acts 24:16.

"I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth." Acts 26:9.

Frequently one hears the admonition, "Let your conscience be your guide." Perhaps you have adopted that as one of your mottoes. But, in the choice of a guide, be sure that you choose one that is reliable and safe. Is conscience always a safe guide?

I. The Fact Of Conscience.

What is conscience? Does everyone have a conscience, or are some hard-hearted individuals deserving of the saying, "He does not have a conscience"? God placed that something which we call "conscience" in every individual He created. Just as man would not think of sending forth to sea a ship without a compass on board, so God would not send forth on the rough sea of life any person without a conscience.

Immanuel Kant, the great philosopher, once said "Two things fill me with constantly increasing admiration and awe, the longer and more earnestly I reflect on them: the starry heavens without and the moral law within." This inner law we call conscience. Bishop Butler said: "There is a principle of reflection in men, by which they distinguish between, approve and disapprove their own actions." Conscience seems to hold a place among the moral powers analogous to that which reason holds among the intellectual powers.

Within a man is a voice crying out "You ought." The conscience can only impress the obligation to do what the judgment has already decided to be right. If the judgment is wrong in its decision, it cannot always be right to do what conscience approves. Conscience discerns between or assesses right and wrong. It prompts to do the right, and warns against doing the wrong. When one starts to do wrong, conscience says, "Don't." Do not abuse your conscience. It will not take long for it to get out of order. People who do not get up when the clock alarms soon fail to hear the alarm at all. Likewise, if you disregard your conscience, it will soon get out of order, or you will soon get to the place where you ignore it entirely.

Conscience has been defined as "the inward judgment of the soul, by which our actions are tried and acquitted or condemned." A teacher asked a class of boys, "What is conscience?" One boy replied, "Conscience is a little triangular-shaped thing in the heart of man that always turns over when you do wrong, and oh, how it hurts!" In full activity conscience includes a direct perception of right and wrong in choice, a feeling that right ought to be done and wrong ought not to be done, and complacency in the right and disquietude in the wrong.

Conscience is that inner sense of oughtness which tells us that certain things ought to be done, and that we ought to do them. On the other hand, conscience is that feeling of ought-not-ness which clearly indicates that there are certain things that ought not to be done, and,

therefore, we ought not to do them. If a thing is right, then I ought to do it because it is right, whether I like it or not. And if the thing is wrong, then I ought not to do it, no matter how much I like it, or how frequently I have done it. Conscience imposes an irresistible sense of obligation. It cannot be bought, sold, or given away.

II. The Fluctuations Of Conscience.

The consciences of men differ widely. The conscience is a variable and is frequently lacking in stability. It does not always function as it should, or as God intended. In the Bible we have various terms applied to the conscience.

1. Defiled.

"Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure: but even their mind and conscience is defiled" (Titus 1:15). One whose conscience is defiled cannot distinguish clearly between right and wrong. He can do something which is contrary to the teaching of the Bible and yet he may hear his own conscience saying, "It is all right." Satan makes it his business to darken the minds of men.

2. Evil.

"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" (Hebrews 10:22). It is commonly referred to as a guilty conscience. Have you ever had it? David had it. He said, "For innumerable evils have compassed me about: mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of mine head: therefore my heart faileth me" (Psalm 40:12). Belshazzar had it. "Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another" (Daniel 5:6).

3. Seared.

Paul referred to such in these words, "Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron" (I Timothy 4:2). Did you ever put real hot food in your mouth and burn your tongue? If so, you know how it feels to have a seared tongue. A seared conscience is like that. It is one that has been mistreated to such an extent that it no longer tells you whether or not to do something.

4. Good.

"And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day" (Acts 23:1). "And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offense toward God, and toward men" (Acts 24:16). Like Paul, we should strive to live, in public and in private, so that we may always have a "conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men." Whatever any person gets in life, if in the getting it he has forfeited a conscience void of offence toward God or man, he has paid too high a price for it.

III. The Functions Of The Conscience.

What are the functions of conscience?

1. To direct one in acting.

In this capacity the conscience serves as a tutor in advising. We may regard the conscience as the monitor of the soul, that element within us which warns or advises. It may tell us to do right, but fail to tell us what right is. It does not lay down any law for us to observe, but, if properly educated, it is faithful to remind us to observe the rules and regulations which God has given to us.

2. To pass a judgment upon the acting.

In this capacity, after a thing is done, the conscience serves as a judge to acquit or to condemn. Conscience cannot compel one to do right. Judas Iscariot sold Christ for thirty pieces of silver, but it was not long until his conscience, which was stirred over the transaction, caused the money to burn in his pocket, and he cried out, "I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood" (Matthew 27:4). The crowd jeered at him until he went out and took his own life. Do not get the mistaken idea that, if conscience does not convict, it is a sign that the sin is justified. It reveals that the conscience is unenlightened, untrained, and in dire need of attention.

In a certain school, one of the teachers said that she did not think that it made any difference what a pupil believed or did, provided the pupil was conscientious. It would have been quite easy to have gone to school to that teacher if it did not matter whether the pupil answered right or wrong, just so the student was conscientious. Such a teacher could get contrary answers to the same question and give both pupils a perfect grade.

IV. The Fitness Of The Conscience.

The conscience needs attention. It should be purified. It should be enlightened also. Conscience is dependent on knowledge. Since the illumination of it is necessary, study and prayer are required. To have a conscience void of offence, one must have a good rule of conduct, an impartial comparison of the conduct with that rule, and a conformity of the conduct to that rule. Man's first duty to his conscience is not to follow it, but to enlighten it. If the conscience is kept in tune with the purpose and the will of God, it will prove to be an inestimable blessing.

Is conscience a safe guide? Early in life most of us ask this question. From childhood we have heard the statement, "Let your conscience be your guide." But before we got to be very old we observed that the consciences of different people prompted them to act and to do quite differently. We realized that all of them were not right. Also, we observed that the consciences of people changed with the years. At one time in life, the conscience considered certain conduct to be right and later in life the same conscience considered the same course of action as being wrong. It was then quite clear that a conscience that changed like that could not be a safe guide.

Since the judgment may be wrong in its decision, it cannot always be right to do what conscience approves or permits. We have a splendid illustration of this truth in the case of the greatest Christian who has ever lived. Saul of Tarsus, who was a great religious zealot, thought that he was obliged to persecute the followers of Christ. He was not only earnest and persistent in his efforts to exterminate Christians, dragging men and helpless women to prison, and having a part in the martyrdom of Stephen, but he was influenced and borne along by the highest and the most intense conscientiousness or sincerity. He testified later, "I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 26:9). It was his custom to let his conscience be his guide, but in doing so he did wrong when he caused Christians to be put to death because they loved and served the Christ Who had saved them.

After Saul of Tarsus became a Christian, his conscience directed him in the very opposite course. When he stood before his accusers, Paul said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day" (Acts 23:1). He was just as conscientious when he was arresting Christians and having them put to death as he was when he was spending his efforts in introducing people to Christ as Saviour. Since conscience directs one to do one thing at one time and something else at another time, it is not a safe guide. Perfectly conscientious, the Indian had as his ambition the scalping of as many of his enemies as possible. He did not see anything wrong in that way of life. The Egyptian mother did not feel any guilt whatever in throwing her baby into the Nile River. Conscience told her that it was right to do so. But we shudder at actions of that type.

This inner oughtness must have a standard of right by which to make its judgments. These standards of judgment, as to what is right, must be supplied by the contact of intelligence with life, with the Word of God, and with the Spirit of God. We talk so glibly about letting the conscience be the guide, as if it could tell us exactly what we ought or ought not to do. Conscience is not an infallible guide in any such sense. This attitude toward conscience reminds me of one of the witnesses before the jury appointed to inquire into a case of alleged bribery in a local election. He stated that he had received twenty-five dollars to vote the Republican Ticket. Then, on cross-examination it was elicited that he had received an additional twenty-five dollars to vote the Democratic Ticket. In amazement the foreman of the jury said, "You say you received twenty-five dollars to vote the Republican Ticket?" "Yes, sir." "And you also received twenty-five dollars to vote the Democratic Ticket?" "Yes, sir." "And for whom did you vote at the finish?" With injured dignity in every line of his face, the witness answered with great earnestness, "I voted according to my conscience."

Many times conscience will dictate one thing to one person and a different thing for another person or group. The Hindu's conscience lashes him if he breaks caste; the Christian's conscience lashes him unless he utterly destroys the caste system. The Mohammedan woman's conscience dictates that she veil her face; the Christian woman's conscience tells her that to wear a veil over her face is unsanitary, absurd, and wrong. Anybody expects too much of conscience if he expects it to tell him exactly what to do when in reality all that conscience can do is to insist on doing right.

It is our duty to enlighten the conscience. We should adjust it to the highest and best standard of right. To say, "Let your conscience be your guide," is like saying, "Follow your nose." The outcome of following your nose depends on the direction in which it is pointing. You can get the approval of your conscience as certainly as you can follow your nose. It

is not enough for a navigator to follow his compass, but it is essential for him to know that it is pointing toward the north. The conscience, like a watch, must be set by the highest and best standard -- the Word and the expressed will of God. Your conscience will be a safe guide provided it complies with the Word of God, follows the leadership of the Spirit of God, and directs in the paths that are right. In the life and teachings of Christ are to be found the highest and best things that have ever been set forth. As we follow Him we are always safe.

JOHN NEWTON'S CONFESSION

"In evil long I took delight,
Unawed by shame or fear,
Till a new object struck my sight,
And stopped my wild career.

I saw One hanging on a tree
In agony and blood,
Who fixed my languid eye on me,
As near His cross I stood.

Sure never till my latest breath
Can I forget that look;
It seemed to charge me with His death,
Though not a word He spoke.

My conscience felt and owned the guilt
And plunged me in despair;
I saw my sins His blood had spilt,
And helped to nail Him there.

Alas! I knew not what I did!
But now my tears were vain;
Where shall my trembling soul be hid?
For I the Lord have slain!

A second look He gave, which said,
"I freely all forgive:
This blood is for thy ransom paid;
I die that thou mayest live."

Thus while His death my sin displays
In all its blackest hue,
Such is the mystery of grace,
It seals my pardon, too."