Understanding How We Think

Our Inner Struggle—The Conscience

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"If any person be in Christ, he is a new creature..."
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

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This lesson will look at our conscience. Before you begin this lesson, ask yourself this question, "What does my conscience do?" **Write three or four sentences on your thoughts about how your conscience works on the enclosed** Response Sheet **and then put it away until you finish this lesson.** Next, we recommend that you read the entire lesson through once without looking up the scriptures. Finally, go back for a more in-depth study before completing the Response Sheet.

I. Introduction

Our conscience is that part of us that guides us in making decisions about what is right and what is wrong. Sidney Callahan calls the conscience "a personal, self-conscious activity, integrating reason, emotion, and will in self-committed decisions about right and wrong, good and evil."

From this definition, we see that it is an active part of our decision making process. It does not allow us to decide solely on feelings or thinking. It combines our thinking, feeling, and willingness to act so that when we decide, our entire being is part of that decision.

From Callahan's definition, the goal is not just decision making. It is making decisions that have a moral value. It is deciding between what is good and evil, right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate.

Our conscience is that part of our mind that judges what is right and wrong. For it to make value judgments, the conscience must be properly trained and developed. This places a great responsibility on our families, schools, and churches. These, especially the family, have the greatest influence on us in our early developmental phase of life.

In some sense they are responsible for what we become. This does not, however, remove responsibility from us. The Bible teaches that God has placed within each of us a sense of "oughtness." This is an inane or natural sense of what is right and wrong. We know that murder is wrong, not because the Bible or the law says it is. Something deep down inside us tells us that it is wrong. The Bible and law tell us why it is wrong.

The conscience acts as a filter between what we want and what we do. If we want to do something that has a moral value, that desire or want is sent to our conscience. The conscience determines whether the desire is either right or wrong and tells us how to act. It does not function in a vacuum, but with all our accumulated knowledge and experience.

Just because our conscience tells us that something we want to do is right or wrong, does not mean that we will follow its advice. Sometimes, we will ignore it and go against its advice. This creates what we commonly call a guilty conscience.

Our conscience is not a physical organ like the brain or heart. It is part of that force the brain generates called the mind. It is not something that can be corrected or removed by surgery. It is not something at which a doctor can point and say, "This is a conscience." It is part of that invisible aspect of us, that makes us what we are. It is part of our mind. It is part of our personality. It is part of our soul.

II. The Conscience

The study of the conscience is not a scientific study, but a study of philosophy and religion. It is from philosophy and religion that values, morals, and ethics spring and exist. It is with our values, morals, and ethics that our conscience is concerned. Science, on the other hand, deals with trying to explain the workings of the physical world. It describes physical entities, but *not* their origins, values, and goals.

A. The Role of Conscience

The Apostle Paul tells us that God did not just create the universe and go off and leave man by himself. In Romans 1:18-32 Paul tells us that by looking at the universe around us we can know God.

Paul says that not only can we know God from looking at His universe, but He has placed that knowledge within each of us. Also, He has built within us the knowledge that certain things are right, and certain things are wrong. We can know the difference between right and wrong. We have an inborn, almost instinctive, knowledge of what we "ought" to do. This is the idea of "oughtness." Since we have this oughtness, we have no excuse when we reject God and do evil.

Oughtness is the basis for our conscience. The problem is that when we reject God, we also reject the basis for our conscience. The world turns upside down. Right becomes wrong—wrong becomes right. Good becomes evil—evil becomes good. We become as Paul described the people of his day, "Professing to become wise, they became fools."

Paul gives us an idea of how the conscience develops. It has both an inborn and a learned aspect. The inborn aspect is that sense of oughtness God built into us. The

learned aspect is the impact that our environment (family, friends, culture, society, etc.) has upon us. Of the two, the learned aspect has the greater influence on us. As we can reject the evidence that God built into nature, we can also reject the sense of oughtness that He built into us.

We can allow sin to become such a controlling influence in our life that it destroys our inborn sense of oughtness. Our conscience becomes so warped that right becomes wrong and wrong becomes right.

When we develop our conscience to become more sensitive and receptive to God's teaching, it becomes the guide that God designed it to be. It is to guide us in discerning what is right from what is wrong—what is appropriate from what is inappropriate—what is proper from what is improper (Hebrews 10:2; II Corinthians 4:2). It commends the right and condemns the wrong (Romans 13:5-7; II Corinthians 1:12). It promotes the right and demotes the wrong (Romans 2:14-15).

B. <u>The Conscience as a Filter</u>

When an event happens or when we consider doing something that has moral or ethical value, it is filtered through our conscience. How does our conscience filter events? It depends on several factors. One is the strength of a relationship. Another is whether it has developed to be sensitive and receptive to God's teachings.

Just because a person's conscience is based on the Bible, does not mean that a person will *follow* the advice of his conscience. If his relationship to the event is a strong, personal one, he might decide to act against the advice of his conscience and do what he *wants* to do.

A good example would be a Christian's becoming involved in an extramarital affair. His conscience tells him that it is immoral and to end it. Because of his relationship with his mistress, he decides that he will ignore his conscience and continue in the affair. What happened to this man's conscience? It made the right decision, but the man decided to ignore it.

Another example is that after an individual's conscience has been developed, he rejects the inborn sense of oughtness, using a criminal model. His conscience tells him that it is okay to steal.

If he is in a situation to rob a store and does so, his conscience will tell him that he made the right decision. What he did was immoral and violates God's commands, but

he is not troubled by it. His conscience has been so trained that it tells him he made the right decision.

C. The Parent's Role In Developing the Conscience

The parents play an important role in how a person's conscience develops. Our parents are the most important influence in our lives. For the first few years of our lives, they are our only or major role models. They determine our view of ourselves, society, culture, and morals.

The basic goal of the parents is to guide their children to become mature, independent adults. If the parents are supportive, they will want their children to become their own persons instead of just becoming a clones. They will model what it means to be mature and independent. They will model a conscience that recognizes its inborn sense of oughtness and has a sensitivity to God's teachings.

They give their children the freedom to experiment with not only with what they have modeled but also with other points of view. It does not mean that they approve of everything that their children do. Healthy families provide boundaries within which children are allowed to experiment. Children allowed to go through this process will develop a strong moral conscience.

Authoritarian parents refuse to allow their children any freedom to experiment. They demand that their children become clones of the parents. They have to accept, without question, the parents' values and world view. Such children do not have an independent or mature outlook or a strong moral conscience. They have just accepted their parents' value system without developing it to their personality. They survive until faced with a major challenge, and since it is not their own value system, it will collapse.

D. Two Types of Consciences

1. *The clean, good, sensitive, and clear (Christ centered) conscience*

   A person with a clean, good, and clear conscience has used Christ as his model (Acts 23:1, 24:16; I Timothy 1:5, 19; Hebrews 9:9, 14, 13:18). Regardless of the type of conscience that a person initially developed, he can change it to be Christ like. Because our conscience is developed does not mean that it can never be changed. It is changing all the time. It will either change for the better or worse.

The direction of change will be determined by what we believe. If our emphasis is on money and material objects, our conscience will tell us that anything we do to gain money is right. It will also tell us that failure to do anything possible to gain money is wrong.

If our emphasis is on Christ, our conscience will tell us when we violate Biblical teachings. We allow ourself and our conscience to come into contact with Christ through baptism. (Romans 6:3-11).

The new life that He provides not only cleanses us from sin, but purifies our conscience (Colossians 1:21-22; I Peter 3:16, 21). Once we submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ, the direction our conscience takes is to help us become Christ like. What does it mean to become Christ like? When we walk in the Spirit, we develop His fruit. Our life is characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

When a Christian violates his conscience, it causes him to feel a sense of guilt. This means that his conscience is doing its job. One important aspect of a Christ centered conscience is that it is sensitive to the needs and concerns of others. In Romans 14:1-12 and I Corinthians 10:23-30, Paul talks about the need to be sensitive to those Christians with weak consciences.

A Christian with a weak conscience lives an extremely dangerous life. The weaker it is, the greater chance there is that he will develop a mind set of sin. Just because a Christian has a weak conscience does not mean that he will automatically return to a life of sin. He can live a Christian life as long as he does not violate his conscience. Paul says that whether we are weak or strong, we answer to God for what we do. Christ knows our heart, and He also knows whether we are living within the context of our conscience. If our conscience is weak and we violate it, Christ will judge us.

A Christian with a strong conscience has an obligation to help the weaker brother grow stronger in the image of Christ. He should do nothing that would violate the weaker brother's less developed conscience. This does not mean that the weaker brother has a veto on what the stronger brother can do. It means that the stronger brother considers his weaker brother and tries to help him grow.

Many try to make Paul say that we should not do anything that the weaker brother does not want us to do. Paul does not say that. What he is saying is that we should

not try to force our weaker brother to do something that will cause him to reject Christianity or place his salvation in doubt. What Paul is telling Christians is that although something might be lawful to do, it is not always wise to do it. In other words, let love be your guide in all things.

Both the weaker and the stronger brother have obligations to each other. They both have to be sensitive to the needs, feelings, and beliefs of each other. They both answer to the same Master, who will hold them accountable for holding the other in contempt. Christians, whether weak or strong, have an obligation to love and understand one another.

The Christian has obligations not only to other Christians, but to the unbeliever. The Christian needs to be sensitive to the needs and condition of the unbeliever. By being sensitive to the unbeliever, the Christian can lead him to know Christ.

2. *The weak, defiled, seared, and guilty (flesh centered) conscience.*

There are two types of people who have weak, defiled, seared, and guilty consciences. The first type is the Christian who is living a life of willful sin (I Corinthians 8:7, 10, 12; I Timothy 4:2). This is the person who has at one time accepted Christ as his Lord and Savior but, instead of walking in the Spirit, he allows himself to be drawn back into the ways of the world. There can be several reasons a Christian allows himself to be drawn back into the world. One is that he never developed his conscience to be Christ like.

Another reason is that he thought the deeds of the flesh were more desirable than the fruit of the Spirit. This does not mean that the Christian will never commit a sin. As long as he is on earth, the Christian will still sin; however, this does not mean that he has a mindset to sin. Although the Christian sins, he knows what sin is and tries to avoid doing it.

The second type of person is the unbeliever (Titus 1:15). This is the person who has never accepted Christ. This is the person who has always done the deeds of the flesh. This does not mean that the unbeliever cannot do good deeds. He can. His mind set, however, is not on walking in the Spirit. It is on doing what he wants to do. If it is doing good deeds today, okay. If it is doing evil and wickedness tomorrow, okay. He does what he wants without thought of trying to please God. He seeks only to please himself.

Those who have weak, defiled, and seared consciences feel no pain of conscience when they violate the sense of oughtness. To them, nothing is pure and holy. They live a hedonistic lifestyle. They do exactly as they want to without regard to anyone else. Their consciences have become branded to doing good. When the rancher brands his cattle, the burned flesh becomes tough and dead. The same is true of our conscience. When we have a mind set of sin, our conscience becomes tough and dead. It seeks to do only what is evil—wrong.

E. An Inmate Speaks...

Ted Koppel, on the February 14, 1983 edition of *Night Line*, interviewed an inmate about how he became involved in crime. The inmate told Koppel that his conscience had been trained to believe there was nothing wrong with committing crime. In the interview, it came out that his parents had never accepted him. His self-esteem was low, and he had a low opinion of others. He resented not only his parents but also everybody else. He viewed other people with jealousy, resentment, and frustration. To him jail was an escape from the problems and frustrations of life.

III. Conclusion

Our conscience was designed by God to guide us in making moral and ethical decisions (Proverbs 22:6). Within our conscience God placed a sense of oughtness, the ability to know right from wrong. He did not, however, leave it at that. He also made it possible for us to train and develop our conscience. That training can either make us Christ centered or flesh centered.

We decide how our conscience is trained. Depending on training, it can either help or harm us. It is in our self-interest that we train our conscience to be Christ centered (Galatians 2:20). When we do this, we can live life to the fullest in both this world and the world to come.

Now, please return to the enclosed Response Sheet and write your answers to the study questions about this lesson.