

## **YOU'VE GOT A CONSCIENCE AND CHRIST WANTS IT**

You feel sick when you've done something bad because you have a con-science, that internal referee that makes judgments about the things going on around you. This conscience is a gift from God in creation, it is part of our humanity, and it works like a courtroom where thoughts and actions are tried, and verdicts are pronounced. The conscience causes us to consider three things: our own actions towards others, others' actions towards us, and the general conditions in the world.

But, like everything else in creation, our consciences have been affected by the fall into sin. This, please note, means that your conscience can get things wrong. It is entirely possible to feel guilty when you have done nothing wrong, or when a wrong has been done to you. We sometimes call this shame. It is often the case that we don't feel guilt when we should. We call this a calloused or hardened conscience. Our guilt is often disproportionate to our sin - our consciences are out of whack, out of sync with the Law.

There are at least four things that influence the conscience, that affect its ability to make a correct assessment: the civil law, the culture, our peers, and, for the Christian, the Scriptures. The more the law of the land and the general cultural milieu stagger away from natural law, the more difficult it is for our consciences to see clearly what is right and wrong.

Our peers are an especially strong influence on how well the conscience is working. Family members, for example, are often helpful in making our consciences more sensitive. A group of delinquent teenage boys has the opposite effect. Paul warns that "bad company ruins good morals," (1 Corinthians 15:33); that is, our peers affect our consciences.

The devil is always at work in the conscience, hardening it, tempting it, troubling it. The devil knows our consciences, what troubles us and what doesn't. He knows how sensitive we are to sin, and he always brings the properly proportioned temptation to have the best chances of snaring us in sin. The devil loves addictions because repetitive sin has the effect of hardening the conscience. The devil is at work confusing, distorting, and callousing the conscience.

The antidote to the devil's work is the Lord's Word. So, finally, the Christian knows the Ten Commandments, and these speak with authority in our consciences. This is probably why Luther, in the Catechism, sends us to work singing a hymn "like that of the Ten Commandments." Meditation on the Ten Commandments is conscience training, tenderising the conscience to the Lord's law

A conscience that is working properly knows what is good and bad, what is sin and what is not, but this is not yet a "good" or a "clean" conscience. The speedometer that is working properly is the one that tells us when we are speeding. The con-science that is working properly is the one that tells us when we are sinning, and this is a busy conscience. We are always sinning.

The temptation, then, is to chase after a good conscience with good works. If my conscience accuses me of breaking the law, then it will commend me for keeping the law. But we are sinners, slaves to sin. We cannot do good. Try as we might, the accusing voice of the law in our consciences will not be silenced through obedience to the law. There is only one way to a good and clean conscience: the blood of Jesus.

This is what the Scriptures speak regarding a good conscience, a clean con-science. Paul writes to Timothy: "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Timothy 1:5). Hebrews says, "...and since we have a great priest [Jesus Christ] over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil con-science and our bodies washed with pure water," (Hebrews 10:21-22).

A good conscience is a conscience that knows the death of Jesus. A good conscience is a conscience where the voice of Jesus is heard. A good conscience is not a conscience that has no sin, but it is a conscience where sin is forgiven, died for by Jesus, covered with His blood; it is a conscience wrapped in the white robes of His righteousness. A good conscience is a forgiven conscience.

In the end, the devil tempts our consciences to pass the verdict. The attorney wants to act like the judge. So the devil (misusing the law) will declare us good enough. "I'm a good person, surely I will go to heaven." Wrong. There is no good conscience without Jesus.

Or, the devil (again misusing the law) says, "You'll never be saved. You've sinned too much. You are too wicked." Wrong. It is God who judges, and He gave your death sentence to His Son so that you might have life.

The devil is right when he calls us sinners. He is wrong when he condemns us to hell. Jesus has suffered. He has died and rose again and ascended to God's right hand. Jesus brings before the Father the evidence of His blood, His cross, and the testimony of our sin is struck from the record. We are absolved, declared righteous and holy by the heavenly court. And if the blood of Jesus stands in this courtroom, then it stands in our consciences as well.

"How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (Hebrews 9:14). You have a conscience, and Jesus wants it. He wants your conscience to hear the Law, but most especially He wants your conscience to ring with the Gospel, to be comforted with the absolution, and to be settled and at peace because He, your Jesus, has done everything for your life and salvation.

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