

THE CONSCIENCE

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If you've ever done someone wrong and then found yourself unable to look that person in the eye, you've experienced the power of the human conscience. It has a tremendous power over the spirit to either bring it great strength or to sap it of its power. This article seeks to present the Bible's teachings on this important subject.

I. The Conscience Before Trusting Christ

The Bible teaches that God has placed basic principles of His Law in every person's conscience (Romans 2:14,15). This operates whether or not the person ever reads the Bible or even has been told anything about God.

However, by the constant ignoring of that conscience, the internal voice can be dulled to the point that when evil is done the conscience responds very little or not at all. A conscience in this condition is referred to as a "seared conscience" in I Timothy 4:2.

II. The Conscience After Trusting Christ

The Bible also speaks of three different types of conscience that the true Christian may have.

A. The Weak Conscience

This conscience is essentially an uninstructed conscience -- lacking in a knowledge of the Bible to the point where it is overly sensitive and calls some activities "sins" which are not wrong according to the teachings of the Bible (I Corinthians 8:1-13).

In the situation discussed in I Corinthians 8:1-13, the Apostle Paul was answering the question of whether or not a true Christian should eat meat that had first been offered to idols and then sold in the market place.

On the one hand, some Christians were saying, "What difference does it make? Idols are only pieces of wood and stone!" (I Corinthians 8:4-6).

While others had consciences that were bothered by eating the meat. **THESE WERE THE PEOPLE WITH THE WEAK CONSCIENCES** (I Corinthians 8:7). Because they were bothered by something that God's Word had not forbidden in either principle or commandment, they had "weak consciences."

Those Christians with weak consciences today oftentimes label certain activities as wrong when the Bible does not condemn them at all. This causes them to pull back further and further from those very people God wishes them to get close to -- showing the

world His love. Whenever the Church's culture rather than God's Word shapes our behavior, we will dilute the impact we can have on those around us.

An increased knowledge of the Bible has the power to strengthen a weak conscience (I Corinthians 8:7) so that the individual can begin seeing activities in the light of the Bible's teachings rather than the light of some man-made standard or cultural taboo.

However, as a point of warning, a person with a weak conscience can defile his conscience much easier than someone else, since to the person with a weak conscience there are more activities that their conscience will label as "wrong." Therefore, others with stronger consciences need to walk carefully so as not to encourage the person with the weak conscience to go against his conscience (I Corinthians 8:9-12) before their conscience has been strengthened through increased knowledge of the Bible. Anytime we go against our conscience, the Bible says that our conscience has been "defiled."

Nevertheless, the person with the weak conscience also must guard against judging others for doing things that his conscience has told him is wrong.

Of course in this discussion, we are not talking about those activities that Bible has clearly indicated as being wrong (i.e. lying murder, sexual impurity, etc.) We are speaking of those gray areas in which there is no clear teaching in either commandment or principle in the Bible.

As you can see, God will sometimes work in different people's consciences in different ways concerning gray areas of activities. Depending upon the person's background and inherent weaknesses, an individual's conscience might even bother them about attending a baseball game. Possibly this person has found baseball a consuming passion so strong that its focus can even replace God's rightful #1 place in his/her life. In this case, that person then should NOT go to a game nor should they condemn another Christian whose conscience does not bother them when they go to a baseball game.

And in even some situations the person with the freedom to go to a game will not go to a baseball game if going to that game would cause the other weaker conscience Christian to go against his or her own conscience.

B. A Defiled Conscience

This is a conscience which has not been heeded (I Corinthians 8:7; Titus 1:15). Whenever a person goes against his or her own conscience, it becomes defiled.

C. A Pure Conscience

This conscience knows of no offense against God or another human being that has not been addressed and taken care of (II Timothy 1:3; I Timothy 1:5; Acts 24:16).

III. The Effects Of A Defiled (Guilty) Conscience

When we have an offense before God which we have not acknowledged, we don't have the boldness before Him necessary to ask for what we need for our spiritual growth. Our desire for closeness with Him in prayer through meeting with other Christians or through studying the Bible becomes less and less (I John 3:21,22; Psalm 32:1-5).

When we carry a guilty conscience, we are limited in our ability to talk to others about God, since we realize they can point a finger at us in areas we have not made right (I Peter 3:16; I Peter 2:12).

Finally, if we continue to carry a guilty conscience, our spiritual life will become a "shipwreck" from the lack of closeness with God and other Christians (I Timothy 1:18,19).

IV. Maintaining A Pure Conscience

The Apostle Paul expresses the importance of maintaining a pure conscience in Acts 24:16 when he says:

"And in this do I always exercise myself, to have a conscience clear of offense towards God and towards men."

Not that Paul would never offend God or man through sin (I John 1:9), but rather that he wanted to always be able to look God "in the eye" and every person "in the eye" knowing that there was nothing between them that had not been confessed and made right.

WARNING: The Bible and NOT our conscience is the final guide for living life God's way. I Corinthians 4:3,4 tells us that it is possible for our conscience to indicate to us that nothing is wrong and still there is. Remember that our conscience is limited by the knowledge of the Bible we possess. Therefore, the Bible is our final guide not only how we might feel about a matter.

Here are some suggested steps for ridding yourself of a guilty conscience. . .

1. Take a pencil and paper and attempt to list all of the matters that might be standing between either you and God or you and other people. Write each one down as it comes to mind.
2. After writing the list, go over each one and specifically acknowledge in prayer to God that you know that it was wrong and then go onto thank Him for His forgiveness of that wrong based on I John 1:9 and Colossians 2:13.
3. Have the courage to go to the people who know you have wronged them and acknowledge the wrong you have done -- humbly asking them for their forgiveness too.

The above steps are often necessary when we've "let things go" for awhile. However, from this point on keeping short accounts is the best way to maintain that most powerful inner resource -- a pure conscience!

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