

UNDERSTANDING AND WORKING WITH THE CONSCIENCE

PASTOR DEAN LINSKY

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THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF THE CONSCIENCE

I. CONSCIENCE DEFINED

The conscience is an inborn self-reflective reflex mechanism in our souls connecting our minds and emotions to the moral structure of God's creation and the moral influences of our community.

inborn self-reflective reflex mechanism

Inborn mechanism of human nature—it is part of the structure of the human soul possessed by all persons.
It is the mechanism that generates the feeling of guilt.

Inborn: The conscience is a moral faculty God built into every human soul.

All human beings are originally programmed with awareness of what is generally good and evil according to God's standards.

Seen from the beginning of human history:

Gen 3:8 Adam and Eve after falling into sin;

Genesis 4:7 Note Cain's obligation to comply with God's order for fellowship.

Gen 20:1-10 Story of Abimelech, the heathen with a conscience.

Seen in the testimony of the New Testament.

The NOUN **syneidesis** usually translated "conscience" occurs 30 times.

Literal meaning = "know in common with" or "the self that knows with itself." It may mean simply "be conscious" or "be aware" of something (ISBE I, 762).

The *syneidesis* is not merely another action performed by the self; The Greeks saw it as alter ego, another self within the self that observes the self and then testifies as to what it sees.

Paul's testimony Acts 24:16, Acts 23:1.

Conscience as one evidence of the validity and universality of moral law. Romans 1:18-20
Even wicked people know that their sin is wrong, at least in some measure.

Romans 2:14-15.

The conscience—an evidence of common grace.

The inward sense of right and wrong that God gives to all people is an aspect of what we call common grace. (Grudem, Sys Theol, 600)
It explains why people will frequently approve of moral standards that reflect many of the moral standards in Scripture.

Self-reflective: The conscience takes the values inculcated in us and produces authentic justifiable negative feelings of guilt when we violate those values.

Guilt is a painful awareness of thinking or doing wrong—wrong being a violation of some moral standard.

The original purpose for this experience of guilt-pain in our emotions is to prompt us to abandon bad thoughts and actions or to prompt us to avoid them in the future.

Reflex: The conscience is a reflex because it functions automatically unless consciously suppressed by resistance or concentration on counteracting ideals and values.

Connecting our minds and emotions to the moral structure of God's creation and the moral influences of our community.

The conscience takes the values of good and wrong that we have been programmed with or have been taught and automatically compares our thinking and acting to those values.

Conscience is a moral **instinct** that persists as long as the memory functions.

It is possible to write over the originally programmed knowledge of right and wrong with conflicting human values and beliefs, but the original programming of God's values cannot be deleted.

II. HOW DOES THE CONSCIENCE FUNCTION?

A. The conscience is distinct from the mind, but fully integrated with the mind and fully dependent on it.

Romans 7:22 "the inner man" = conscious self-awareness. For the Christian there is a joyful agreement with God's law in the inner person.

If your conscience is overruled by humanistic reasoning that conflicts with the word of God, that will not stop your conscience from afflicting you. If you obey your conscience, it will supply your mind with peace. But if it is functioning based on false instruction, it can also provide **false** peace.

B. Your conscience is also distinct from your will but its urgings will challenge the will.

C. Your conscience is distinct from your emotions. But if violated, your conscience will afflict your emotions with guilt pain.

Summary

The conscience is an amazing moral faculty.

As such, it can assist you in making judgments about what is good and bad; what is right and wrong. And what is pleasing to God and displeasing to Him.

Your conscience evaluates not only your past thoughts and actions, but your present ones as well.

It can deliver pain to you after doing something that is dishonorable, unkind, deceitful, or morally wrong.

Thus, the conscience in some cases functions as an **adversary** accusing us for doing wrong.

When it is healthy, it can **produce hesitation** in your mind about committing a sin.

The **absence of guilt** may signal an absence of conflict with God's truth.

The claim, "I have peace about. . ." (you fill in the blank) usually means, there is no presence in your soul of guilt and thus no sense of conflict with God. However, this is not necessarily a safe confidence.

The conscience can also function as an **advocate** motivating us to think and do what is right, what is loving, and what is honorable.

This is where the presence of convictions has its place. Convictions motivate us to stand for and do what we believe to be true and right.

Does the conscience provide us with forewarning against sin?

To the extent that we remember our past pains from previous conflicts with our conscience, and anticipate the same accusations from it, we will be warned away from choices that should conflict our consciences in the future.

THE CONSCIENCE: ITS DEVELOPMENT AND LIMITATIONS

I. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONSCIENCE.

Conscience is not implanted full-blown in the human personality.

Your conscience has been shaped by the standards of the people who have been in your life both in your family and the people outside your home. This is true for everyone.

There are two kinds of influences in this world—those who know Jesus Christ as Savior and walk with God and those who are captives of the Devil who consciously or unconsciously support his evil rule.

Colossians 1:7-14

The Christian's conscience is in a lifelong process of being shaped by the Word of God and by the fellowship of believers. Hebrews 10:24 -25

The Bible is essential for the education of the conscience.

A. The consciences of children require training.¹

Historically the people who taught children their values were parents.

Conscience training begins largely through **parental** instruction in practical morality as well as the moral principles and ideals. In the early stages, prohibitions and expectations are taught to children as directives. They serve as the foundation for their moral responses.

This underdeveloped state of conscience in children is an unavoidable step in development because a child lacks experience and the skill of abstract moral thinking.

As they move past the toddler years and develop patterns of respect and obedience, you begin to explain the moral reason why you are giving them the directives you do.

B. The manner in which a young person's conscience is instructed will impact its development.

A parenting style that regularly **conditions love and acceptance** on their child's performance of moral directives often produces a child with a **self-condemning conscience**.

Why? Because as the child grows in a context of conditional love, he feels he must earn parental affection through external performance.

When a child is growing up in this context the conscience can become negative, inflexible, and unreflective. With that kind of conscience and child's sense of guilt can become unhealthy—a paralyzing perfectionism that can never find rest.

Equally damaging is a **permissive** parenting style that fails to require obedience or respect.

Conscience **maturity** begins in earnest in adolescence and is furthered by a climate that encourages both personal commitment to Christ and to His moral priorities.

When the grace of God is presented to a child as the basis of their acceptance, then moral structure becomes a safeguard to their security and happiness, not the means to it.

Goodness becomes the pursuit of positive virtue rather than a fear-ridden process of avoiding evil.

Parents must serve as their children's consciences until the children begin to mature. This demands integrity and consistency from the parent. But at some time there must begin to be a challenge to the child to exercise their own conscience. But without moral training, this will fail.

There must come a time when you not only tell your children what proper behavior is, but also the Biblical reason **WHY**.

Your **ultimate goal** as a Christian parent is to teach your children to depend on God, obey their consciences, and learn to educate their own consciences by learning the truth of the Scriptures.

C. Conscience development when salvation comes after childhood.

For people who become Christians later than childhood, their consciences will necessarily undergo a reindoctrination.

The former standards of parents, friends, or community may be overruled by what you are learning about the will of Christ from the Word of God.

A previously dull or insensitive conscience will be awakened to new and possibly agonizing awareness of the conflict between Christ's standards and those of one's past in the world (cf. Rom 3:20; 7:19).

D. Life experiences contribute to conscience development.

The personal responses you have made to all the different kinds of moral or ethical challenges you have faced, have shaped your conscience.

II. THE LIMITATIONS OF THE CONSCIENCE

A. The Conscience is not INFALLABLE.

Paul (Phil 3:4-7).

The "strong" believers in Corinth 1 Corinthians 4:3-5

A clear conscience does not automatically mean that there is no sin in your heart or your life.

Your conscience might be silent because your mind is still insufficiently educated in God's commands and principles.

Consequently, you are not conscious specifically of how your attitudes or actions may be out of alignment with His precepts.

We are ignorant or insensitive to many sins we commit.

Psalms 19:12

B. Your Conscience can be limited in its function by "weakness":

1 Corinthians 8:4-8

"Weak" meant consciences still bound by false religious beliefs. They believed meats offered to idols as sacrifices were impure and could defile them making them displeasing to God.

Paul did not say their consciences were bad. They were **good in their sensitivity** to what they formerly were taught → unfortunately, what they were taught was wrong.

Paul's concern was to protect the **function** of conscience.

He did not want Christians to learn to override their consciences without having developed new convictions.

Here Paul echoes the teaching of Jesus: food does not consecrate us or defile us according to Jesus—Mark 7:14-23

C. A pain-free conscience may not guarantee approval with God.

Who were the people Paul saw as "free", that is, exercising their freedom to go to parties in idol temples? The Corinthian believers who believed that idols were foolish and had no spiritual reality.

The way out of the dilemma (for either party) is not to act out of "knowledge" (8:1ff), or by copying the "strong" brother whose conscience does not pain him, but out of love.

Paul's instruction to the Corinthians on the matter of buying meat or eating it as a dinner guest? 1 Corinthians 10:25—28

A conscience that feels no guilt is no guarantee of being right.

The ultimate grounds for approval with God are love for others and the glory of God. Conviction must be built on cultivating clear understanding of God's truth—provided in His Word.

Inhibitions, scruples, and even the fear of God must be measured by the Word of God.

You can be as self-restrictive as you want to be for yourself, but you have no grounds beyond Scripture for calling someone else to submit to your standard of approval with God.

Conscience can be a defective guide, if one relies solely on the absence of the pain in it.

¹ Some comments adapted from an article by Drs. Gary Farley and Lars Granberg: ZPEB I, 943D/

HOW THE CONSCIENCE CAN BE STRENGTHENED, PROTECTED, or DEFILED

I. STRENGTHENING THE CONSCIENCE

The mature conscience is able to see situations not specifically covered in Scripture and recognize how Scriptural principles apply to these varying situations.

But the conscience, like the Christian, encounters conflicts with God's precepts on a daily basis. Because life is dynamic, the healthy conscience is continually at work comparing the choices life presents to us with truth about righteousness we are learning from the Bible.

Romans 7:8 Apart from the Law sin is dead. Moral standard awakens the soul to sin.

The conscience requires two things in order to be healthy:

A. Proper Education.

The conscience knows and uses the values impressed on it through the mind.

Romans 12:1-2 Christian understanding develops as the mind becomes increasingly educated in the truth of Scripture.

Parents, teachers, friends, pastors, coaches, and society all present our minds with many values.

Ultimately, only the Scriptures can give you God's objective, consistent, and authoritative revelation of what is right and what is wrong.

John 17:17 "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth."
As the informed Christian mind reflects on its experiences in the world and its understanding of God's truth, the conscience compares our thoughts, attitudes, reactions, and behavior to the Law of Christ.

Hebrews 4:12

And the incomparable advantage that Christians have over unbelievers for the development of their conscience is the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit enables us to understand the implications of God's word for our lives.

The wisdom of God is revealed to us by the Spirit of God.

1 Corinthians 2:7-10

11 "For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him?"

[what is this "spirit of a man"? It is the moral center in the human soul—the **conscience**.]

1 Corinthians 2:14

B. Proper Exercise Hebrews 5:12-14

One aspect of this practice would involve daily bringing ourselves to a remembrance of what Christ has done for us in the shedding of His blood for our sins:

Hebrews 9:11-14; 10:19-23

Practice in obeying the Scriptures produces a strong discerning conscience.

II. PROTECTING AND PRESERVING THE CONSCIENCE

Quick response to the promptings of your conscience builds it up. Especially not debating it in a moment of decision or temptation.

It is OK to question the promptings of the conscience—but that is best done while searching for, reviewing, and meditating on applicable Scriptures.

It is definitely possible to suffer false guilt as a result of false or imbalanced teaching from God's word.

But it is best to obey your conscience until you are sure that it is being influenced by bad theology.

III. HOW THE CONSCIENCE IS DEFILED

The consciences of unbelievers will be **suppressed** or **hardened** in various areas of morality, depending on cultural influences and personal circumstances.

When a sin is repeated but pangs of conscience are resisted, the conscience in that area will often diminish.

The witness of conscience is still there in each case but is **suppressed** through repeated rejection.

A. Conscience can be *defiled* when false teachings or ideas are allowed to settle in your mind.

2 Corinthians 11:3-4; 1 Timothy 1:3-4

B. The conscience can be *seared*—made insensitive—by persistent hypocrisy

1 Tim 4:1-3

C. Conscience can be *weakened* by refusal to allow truth to settle in you that upsets your comfort or restrains your pleasures.

IV. PROBLEM CONSCIENCES

A. The *prohibitive* conscience: a rigidly fixed, negatively-oriented childish conscience dominated by guilt feelings.

Not until he understands that the forgiveness of the cross is not temporary and not lost if he fails, will he gain the freedom of conscience available to every Christian.

B. The *literalistic* conscience: seen in those who remain largely fixed in a child's type of conscience which is rigid, unbending, and without a capacity to see beyond the absolutes of Scripture.

C. The *scrupulous* conscience: self-doubting, fearful of making moral decisions, and spending much time second-guessing themselves.

D. The *lax* conscience: so lacking in moral instruction and training that they find it easy to ignore moral obligations. These are the ones with lax business ethics, comfortable with lying, who appear immune to hypocrisy.

D. The *corrupted* conscience: Consciences of hypocrites who at one time may have claimed some religious commitment but have come to reject the Word of God in their religious practice. (Titus 1:15)

V. FALSE GUILT

Feeling obligated to do something you are not responsible for.

Feeling shame for something that was not your responsibility.

Feeling prohibited from something that God never identified as wrong.

Feeling guilty for something, but you can't specifically identify what it is.

How do you know if the convictions of your conscience are from man or from God? Here are some questions that can be derived from a study of conscience in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10:

Ask yourself:

1. Will accepting this admonition help me glorify God more?
2. Will accepting this admonition help me avoid tearing down a fellow believer's faith?
3. Will accepting this admonition help me strengthen a non-Christian's understanding of Christ and the gospel?
4. Will accepting this admonition help me strengthen a fellow believer's faith?
5. Will accepting this admonition help me become more like Christ?

The remedy for false guilt?

First, being very careful to not override your conscience.

Second, examine your sense of responsibility with Scripture and prayer. Develop a clear understanding of God's priorities in your life. Are you submitting to your responsibilities, or avoiding them?

Third, remain dependent on God to help you fulfill your perceived responsibilities. Make it a spiritual learning situation.

Fourth, be proactive. Focus on developing a servant's heart and love for people rather than just seeking to avoid guilt.

The heart of Christ is a heart of self-sacrificial concern for others.

Love may feel the pain of not being able to do more, but that pain will not be the guilt of selfish refusal to try.

THE RESTORATION AND JOY OF A CLEAR CONSCIENCE

I. HOW THE CONSCIENCE CAN BE CLEARED BEFORE GOD AND MEN

Why would you want to make an effort to clear and restore your conscience before God and men?

It would be because you realize that your sin has created a barrier between you and God.

You sense that you have moved away from the warmth and strength and joy you once experienced in your relationship with God.

Something similar on the human level has developed with another person.

This kind of realization may take place suddenly or it may be a slow awakening after months or years of spiritual compromise or failure to search for a strong spiritual church to grow in.

This is an awakening to a specific sin or to a pattern of spiritual passivity. Either way, your conscience has broken through to you and alerted you that you are out of alignment with God's will.

However it comes, you realize a change is needed—that's the beginning of repentance.

For the genuine believer in Christ there are **four steps** to a complete repentance that will clear your conscience:

A. By repentance toward sin.

It begins with an honest acknowledgement that an attitude or a pattern of behavior is or was contrary to what Scripture teaches.

Repent of wrong beliefs, attitudes, or actions.

B. By confession to God and admission to all who have been harmed by your sin.

To confess means to agree with God that according to His Word, you were wrong.

Proverbs 28:13 "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy."

Admit your transgressions to God. 1 John 1:9 Psalm 51:1-4

Confession must be specific.

Acknowledge your transgression to those you have harmed or negatively influenced by your wrong. Matthew 5:21-24

The Goal:

Getting to the point where you know of no one who could point a finger at you and say, "You wronged me and never tried to make it right." (1 Peter 3:9-16)

C. By Asking forgiveness

4 essential components of a confession of sin and request for forgiveness:

- 1) Your words of confession must identify the basic offense. Keep it brief and to the point.

"I have come to realize that I was wrong when I: (specify the act, behavior, or attitude you are seeking forgiveness for)."

For example:

"My behavior/attitude was (specify the wrong) and wrong."

untruthful	lazy	disrespectful
argumentative	unforgiving	insensitive
cowardly	judgmental	unloving
selfish	proud	careless
ungrateful	immoral	offensive

- 2) Your words must express full repentance and sincere humility. If you cannot do that, you need to pray to God that He breaks you down more in order to genuinely get to that point. Otherwise everything you say will be hypocritical and though the other person may not know it, you will and there will be no relief from your conscience.

You must admit your fault with absolutely no attempt to: shift any blame or minimize your responsibility (no excuses).

3) By offering restitution for harm done.

Restitution—paying for losses or damages your sin may have caused. ILLUSTRATION: **Zaccheus**, Luke 19:1-10

When you ask for forgiveness, your words must express genuine commitment to making the offended person and your relationship with them as good or better than it was before.

4) Your words must ask directly and humbly for forgiveness.

This means finishing your confession and offer of restitution with the words, **“Will you forgive me?”**

That is the bottom line. That is putting yourself at the mercy of the other person and God.

That kind of humble handling of your sin will build up your conscience and provide a powerful restraint against future violations of it.

II. THE JOY AND POWER OF A CLEAR CONSCIENCE

A. Peace of mind. Romans 5:1-2

No need to look over your shoulder and wonder when you sin is going to catch up with you. 2 Cor 1:12

Peace of mind even in the face of false accusations or bitter recriminations by people who have defiled their consciences.

B. Less vulnerability to manipulation by people who have corrupted their consciences.

C. Freedom to forget past failures and move forward.

2 Corinthians 5:17

Philippians 3:12-14

D. Not as easily afflicted by doubts about salvation.

2 Cor 1:12

III. EVANGELIZING THE UNSAVED CONSCIENCE.

A. People are ignorant about Jesus and His teachings.

They especially do not understand the Gospel.

And they surely do not understand grace.

Most people think that assurance of salvation comes only after achieving a high level of virtue performance.

B. This faulty thinking allows us to probe their consciences.

Since we know that all men have consciences.

And since we know that the conscience will cling to truth, even when the mind tries to rationalize it away, and since we know that the conscience produces guilt even when it is overridden,

C. Speak Scripture to unsaved people whenever you can.

We have to educate people about what God thinks.

Conscience will afflict the emotions even when the mind has set up rationalizations against truth.

D. Pray for a sincere interest in people—a sincere curiosity about how they think and why.

E. The approach:

You be their counselor. You tell them the truth.

But don't argue with them. Don't get offensive or insulting. Just be inquisitive.

Ask them if they think what they are good.

Whatever they answer, ask them **how they know and are they sure?**

Ask them if failure to be good bothers their conscience.

You can disturb people's consciences **without** getting obnoxious or offensive.