

THE CONSCIENCE OF MAN ROMANS 2:14-15

The conscience of man is the moral database of our soul that recognizes the distinction between right and wrong and then speaks forth with an inner voice its unsolicited opinion.

So, depending on the nature of our conduct, our conscience is both friend and foe, accusing or else excusing us.

I want us to look at this matter of our conscience today so that we may nurture, protect and train it to be a valuable companion in our lives.

Let's begin by going back to the very beginning...to where man was created by God and see:

I. THE BEGINNING OF THE CONSCIENCE. (Genesis 3:4-5, 22)

As with many, if not most, of the doctrines of the Bible, we find the first information on the conscience in the book of Genesis.

After Eve had botched the Lord's command regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Satan began to question and deceive.

Was Satan lying? Yes and No...he was being very deceptive by mixing truth with a lie.

After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit look at what God Himself said in **verse 22!**

God confirmed that **man had indeed become like God in the sense that he knew good and evil. What Satan didn't tell Eve was that unlike God, they could not resist the force of evil** which, after they ate of the fruit, came and infected their bodies and souls and killed their spirits!

Although their lives were now saturated by this evil force called sin, Adam and Eve and, consequently, all of their descendants now had a knowledge of good and evil!

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Man was, from that point, innately able to differentiate between good and evil. **This code of right and wrong written in the heart of man is what is known as the conscience.**

THE BEGINNING OF THE CONSCIENCE...

II. THE NATURE OF THE CONSCIENCE.

(Genesis 3:7; Romans 2:14-15)

We also see in **verse 7** how that the first feelings of shame and embarrassment are described.

Who told Adam and Eve that they were naked? Did God tell them? No. Did He also tell them that nakedness was shameful? No.

Amid this new depravity of their sinful hearts, they now had this internal code of ethics and morality—laws of right and wrong were written into their conscience.

This code or law written in the heart is known in philosophical writing as "*Natural Law*" — not to be confused with the "*laws of nature*" which deal with such things as the forces of gravity, aerodynamics and other observable forces we observe. **Natural law is the moral code placed into the heart of man after the fall giving him an innate sense of right and wrong, good and evil.**

As we saw in our text in *Romans 2:14-15*, the Apostle Paul was convinced of the existence and importance of natural law in the lives of even pagan man.

Paul here goes so far as to argue that **the law in men's hearts is so evident that it gives God a sufficient basis to hold them accountable for sins at the final judgment.**

The idea of the context here is that the pagan Gentiles will not be able to plead that they didn't have the Mosaic Law and thus didn't know!

III. **THE DISPENSATION OF THE CONSCIENCE. (Genesis 4:14)**
Many theologians refer to the first dispensation after the fall of man as the Age of Conscience.

There is little evidence in Scripture of any instruction that God gave to man after the fall regarding personal conduct, civil law or ceremonial law.

We do know from Hebrews 11:4 that Abel offered up a sacrifice by faith (i.e., in response to God's revelation on sacrifices). But basically, God let the first couple and their descendants live with each other and otherwise aim to please Him based only upon the dictates of their own consciences.

It wasn't long before **the conscience proved to be merely an ignored advisor.**

Cain murdered Abel. And although it would be some 1500 years until the death penalty was mandated by God after the flood in **Genesis 9:6, Cain's conscience taught him that the natural penalty for intentionally taking a human life was death. (Read Genesis 4:14)**

In the years that followed Abel's murder up to Noah's day, we find that mankind failed miserably to govern himself or to serve God, and so, **God gave more revelation after the Flood and eventually gave to Israel in His own words a detailed code of right and wrong.**

However, **the civil and criminal code of the Mosaic Law was nothing new to mankind according to what Paul says in Romans 2, but was largely a written version of the law already written in people's hearts.**

IV. **THE LAWS OF CONSCIENCE.**

The Bible gives us insight into natural law by mentioning things that **"by nature"** are wrong. Public nakedness is wrong. We see this in Genesis 3:7 where not a word was said, but Adam and Eve **felt a sense of shame.**

Homosexuality, by nature, is wrong. Paul said in **Romans 1:26-27** that wicked men and women exchanged the natural use of their bodies for what was against nature.

1 Corinthians 11:14 states that nature itself tells us that it is a shame for a man to have long hair.

John Locke, who was a great 17th century philosopher and writer, in his Second Treatise on Civil Government, argued from the books of Genesis, Exodus and Romans that **God has given to men the inalienable rights of life, liberty and property.**

We have convictions in our consciences which are the underpinning of law in western culture—that a person cannot be deprived of life, liberty or property without due (proper) process of law.

To kill someone while not acting in self-defense, to strike or restrain a person, or to take someone's property or money **is wrong, whether or not there is a written law against it**, unless that person is being punished by a proper authority after the proper process of law has been carried out.

A clean conscience is critical for worshiping the Lord, properly understanding His Word and serving our fellow believers.

Our legal system confesses to the existence of these natural laws of conscience. There are two basic divisions in criminal law:

1. Actions which in and of themselves are universally held by all mankind as evil and wrong (such as theft, rape, murder, etc.). These crimes are a reflection of the natural law written in the hearts of all men and therefore they have been codified in state and federal criminal statutes.
2. Actions which are only wrong because the authority says they are wrong (such as driving 70 mph in a 55 zone—there is nothing inherently wrong with driving at 70 mph).

V. THE CLEANSING OF THE CONSCIENCE.

In **Acts 24:16**, Paul said that he wanted to always maintain a conscience without offense toward God and men.

There are several very important reasons for wanting to remain sensitive to a clean conscience.

A clean conscience is critical for worshipping the Lord, in properly interpreting and understanding His Word, and in serving our fellow believers. (1 Timothy 1:5)

Then look how he warns the young pastor Timothy in *verse 19*.

Later in this book in **3:9**, he requires that Church leaders in particular must be those *"holding [as in a cup or vessel] the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience"*.

Those who crack this vessel of a **pure conscience** by sinning and failing to confess and forsake that sin become unable to hold the faith (that's doctrinal purity) and will eventually they will suffer the shipwreck of apostasy or moral impropriety.

Paul also points out how that the false teachers in the latter times of the Church *"shall depart from the faith . . . having their consciences seared with a hot iron" (4:1,2)*.

So, **doctrinal accuracy is necessarily intertwined with a pure conscience.**

The writer of **Hebrews** in **10:22** adds that we should *"draw near to God with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."*

The word *"confess"* in **1 John 1:9** is saying to God with a contrite heart what our conscience has already been whispering to us. When we do that it brings the cleansing of the heart and conscience.

Paul mentions in **Romans 13:5** that we are to obey government authorities, not just because we'll get in trouble if we don't (*"for wrath's sake"*), but because of our consciences.

Romans 13:5 "Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake."

In the employment context, Peter mentions that we can feel commended by God even if, for conscience sake, we suffer wrongfully. (**1 Peter 2:19, 3:16**)

Maintaining a clean conscience also compels us to guard the consciences of others, and especially those who are younger or weaker in the faith. (**Romans 14:21-23**)

"It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth [he joins you and disregards his conscience], or is offended [his conscience tells him that you are doing wrong] or is made weak [he sees your conduct as a believer and is now uncertain about which is right or wrong]" (Romans 14:21).

That which is done by faith is done with confidence, not with a doubting conscience. (**Vs 22 -23**)

VI. THE SCHOOLING OF THE CONSCIENCE.

Now I don't want you to get the idea that there aren't dangers to those who commit to follow every dictate of their conscience. Because **the conscience has been tainted by sin and can be damaged by sinning against it, and so it needs continual retraining.**

Although the foundation of the conscience is natural law, over time it also becomes home to the teachings, fears, prejudices, ruts and cultural vices that we and our family, our friends and other acquaintances have developed over the years.

These influences to the conscience can be and most of the times is sometimes damaging.

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Through a careful and thorough study of the Word of God over time, we can and must retrain our conscience to affirm only those standards that line up with the Word of God!

That will enable us to worship God more perfectly, understand His Word more correctly and serve our fellow man more fully. We must shed the needless constraints, because needless guilt is a cruel taskmaster. We need to have our consciences purged from dead works to serve the living God (*Hebrews. 9:14*).

VII. THE SPIRIT AND THE CONSCIENCE.

Our conscience speaks with the inner voice of our mind!

The Holy Spirit resides within the believer and also communicates (bears witness) with us through our mind's voice, letting us know that we are His children (Romans 8:16), comforting us (Acts 9:31), guiding us into all truth, etc. (John 14:26, 16:13).

Maturing believers must progressively learn to differentiate between the prompting of the conscience and the prompting of the Holy Spirit speaking through the conscience.

The conscience can bring feelings of guilt about one or many things—feelings which Paul calls "accusations"—but the Spirit brings conviction about one thing at a time and encourages the believer to positively respond.

If a believer sets a pattern of disobeying the inner voice of the conscience, not only will he be condemned by his conscience, but he might establish a more dangerous practice of disobeying the prompting of the Spirit of God.

Fortunately, the fruit of the tree in the garden did not give the knowledge of evil only—if it had, the human race might have ended quickly in a murder/suicide.

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Even in the fall, we experienced God's mercy—an inner witness of both good and God.

Conclusion

The Holy Spirit moves to convict men of sin, and of righteousness, and of Judgment. He uses the conscience of man in that conviction.

Have you responded to the moving of a guilty conscience or the Holy Spirit over some sin in your life? It really doesn't matter which it is!

Realize that if you continue to sin in spite of the promptings of your conscience or the Holy Spirit, you can do damage to your ability to properly respond to God in the future! (You can develop a conscience seared with a hot iron that is past feeling)

Why not repent of that sin today and respond the way your conscience and the Holy Spirit have directed you to respond!

Believers, each of us need to commit to nurture, protect, train and, if need be, restore our conscience so that it may be a faithful, valuable and Spirit-led companion in our life.