



“Is Conscience a Good Guide?”

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Can your conscience be trusted to guide you in matters of what is true and what is right? Do you walk by faith? The Bible says we are to *walk by faith and not by sight*, but what does that mean? Does faith guide your life and your decision making? Or could it be something else that we just think is faith? There is something within most of us that either gives us confidence or makes us feel uneasy or even guilty about the way we live. Well, that’s our conscience. Even though faith is our trust or confidence, our conscience is what warns us inwardly as to whether we’re going the right way or the wrong way. God created us with a conscience, and it’s a wonderful thing, but can we trust it to tell us what is right and what is wrong? Can we trust our instincts or the way we *feel* about a matter to lead us in the right direction? Notice this verse from the book of Proverbs:

Proverbs 14:12 “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.”

Maybe you’ve heard that you should simply follow your heart or listen to that little voice in your heart when you’re deciding matters of right and wrong, truth and error, sin and righteousness. Many believe that, and they live accordingly. But, does that mean that God agrees with us simply because we’re in compliance with our conscience? Solomon warns us that merely because something seems right or feels right, it doesn’t mean that we’re necessarily doing the right thing. We’ll answer this question today: is conscience a good guide?

Many people say that it doesn’t really matter what you believe or practice as long as you follow your conscience. Many will give credence to religious beliefs and traditions simply because sincere people say that it is what their conscience tells them to do. Yet, the Bible tells us that we CAN follow a way that seems right, but in reality, is wrong. We know that to be true in everyday life. In fact, most people will say that it’s very foolish and naïve to follow one’s feelings about things such as our health, our money, business, or politics.

Take your health, for instance. Sometimes a person can carry a disease in his body, all the while feeling fine and happy, going about doing whatever he wants to do. Meanwhile, a cancer is growing inside his body, or maybe a blood clot or aneurism is waiting to break loose or burst. Doctors sometimes treat people conscientiously for the wrong illness until it is too late to save the patient. I had a family member

whom this very thing happened to a few years ago. He complained of having a pain in his abdomen. He continued going to his small-town doctor because he had confidence in him, and this doctor sincerely believed that the problem was merely a hernia, and they would schedule a surgery to remove it at some point. Meanwhile, the symptoms grew worse, finally reaching a point when more testing was done. Those tests revealed that he had stage four cancer. He passed away just months later. Had he gone to see a specialist or been referred to another doctor, he might be alive.

What about matters of business? A lot of businesses fail and investments go bust that were begun with a sincere belief and feeling that they would be successful. The realities of the market proved that their feelings were wrong. Honest intentions and sincere dreams and desires don't keep businesses from going broke. They don't keep the stock market from collapsing either.

I would imagine that at one time all of us have taken a wrong road when travelling, especially before our automobiles became equipped with GPS. It was easy to go to an unfamiliar area and turn onto a road that looked or seemed to head the right direction, going several miles in the wrong direction before realizing that we made a wrong turn. Maybe we didn't look carefully enough at the map, or maybe we missed a road sign, or didn't quite understand the directions that man back at the gas station gave us. We didn't intentionally go wrong, but that doesn't change the fact that we went the wrong way.

You see, if we can't trust our feelings or our conscience in these matters, why would we trust our conscience to make decisions that are so important that they will determine where we spend eternity? Why entrust your soul to something so subjective and demonstrably unreliable as your feelings or, more specifically, your conscience? That's not to say that our conscience is useless; oh, no, the conscience is critical. But a conscience is only as good as the knowledge with which it has been educated. In other words, the conscience has to be trained in righteousness.

Granted, there are some things that are morally inherent in man. We basically know that it is wrong to steal or commit murder. Those truths are engrained within us by nature and by society, even though they have their beginning with God Himself. People in just about every civilized culture and beyond see some moral wrong in the taking of innocent life and in stealing from another person. But the conscience can easily be misinformed or misguided. The way we're raised, the culture around us, our own experiences over time—all these things shape our conscience. If you live in a culture that condones a thing or rejects a thing long enough, you will likely develop a conscience *for* or *against* that thing. Our conscience can be formed and educated by the truth, but if we ignore or go against our conscience for very long, our conscience will change to where it no longer bothers us as it once did. There is a great danger in that.

Ephesians 4:19 “Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.”

Paul is speaking of the Gentiles, who had continued in sin and blindness to the point where they became *past feeling* and could commit all kinds of sin and evil and it didn't bother them to do so. In some cultures, polygamy doesn't bother a person's conscience because it has been trained to think that polygamy is fine. Some can kill in the name of some false religion because that religion has trained their conscience to believe that they are pleasing God by carrying out these acts of terrorism. They believe that what they're doing is right and not wrong.

So, how does our conscience work? What is it good for? Friend, a conscience is more like a court and not a guide. Our conscience is our judgment of self; that power of feeling that lets us know if we're doing what we know to be right or wrong. If we don't know the difference between right and wrong, our conscience will mislead us. When Paul assured the Romans of his deep love for his own kinsmen in the flesh (the Jews) despite their lost condition without Christ, he said this:

Romans 9:1 “I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost...”

So, our conscience is not a legislator; it is a judge. Judges are not supposed to make law. Courts don't draft and pass legislation. Rather, a court decides if conduct has been in accordance with the already established law. Notice, when one has been doing what he has been taught to be right, his conscience is referred to as *pure*.

II Timothy 1:3 "I thank God, whom I serve from my forefathers with pure conscience, that without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day;"

When Paul stood falsely accused before the governor Felix, he said this:

Acts 24:16 "And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men."

Paul did not do anything that his conscience warned him not to do. There is something to be said for that. But, on the other hand, when we violate the warning of our conscience, we defile it and may eventually sear it.

Titus 1:15 "Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled."

Speaking of those who had gone into utter apostasy, Paul said this:

I Timothy 4:2 "Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron;"

That word *seared* doesn't only mean *dull or deadened*, but also *to cauterize*. It is a very dangerous thing to ignore and violate our conscience. We should never do anything that we know or even think is wrong. In regard to those who thought it was wrong to eat certain meats, Paul said:

Romans 14:14 "I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean."

Romans 14:23 "And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin."

If we doubt that a bridge is safe, we should stay off it until we find out whether it is safe or not. If we think our food may be poisoned, we shouldn't eat it until we know for sure. The conscience is a critically useful thing that God has placed within us because of the warnings that it gives us, but it must be properly trained, or it can very easily lead us astray.

When the apostle Paul stood before the Sanhedrin and recounted his story of conversion to Christ, Luke tells us this:

Acts 23:1 "And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day."

There was never a time in Paul's life that he went against his conscience. Oh, but there was a time when he was a terrible sinner. He was a leading persecutor of the early church before he himself met Christ. The very same Paul who said that he had *lived before God in all good conscience* also said this:

Acts 26:9-10 "I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them."

Saul hated the name of Jesus and everything that it represented. But, he wasn't violating his conscience. He was doing what his conscience told him to do. He was like the people of whom Jesus spoke in **John 16:2**.

John 16:2 "They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service."

Instead of the conscience being a safe guide, the conscience needs to be safely guided. Although there may be some inherent perception of morality in a person, matters of religious faith and practice MUST be trained by the true teaching of God's word. There are multitudes of people who practice things in religion in all good conscience that are nowhere taught in the word of God.

Those who practice sprinkling for baptism, for example. They do so because they have been taught by someone that that is right. They can read it in the catechism or creed of their church, but that doesn't mean that it is right. Those who conscientiously try to keep the seventh day as a sabbath day passionately maintain their belief because that is what they've been taught. But the Bible teaches that the Old Testament sabbath was fulfilled in Christ. It is not binding upon the Christian today.

On and on we could go. Methodist doctrine creates a Methodist conscience within a Methodist. Baptist doctrine will create a conscience that encourages one to believe and worship like a Baptist. Catholic doctrine makes a Catholic feel good about saying a rosary or submitting to the decrees of the pope. See, conscience is not a safe guide. The word of God must be our only guide and the only thing that forms and educates our conscience if we want it to help us remain in the will of God. Just because a person does a thing with a clean or good conscience does not prove that he/she is right in the sight of God. When Paul went to the city of Athens, he found that city filled with idols. Paul acknowledged that they were very religious. They were a worshipful people. But they were very mixed up and wrong. They were worshipping the true God of heaven but did not know Him as the true God and they didn't know how to worship Him. They were worshipping many gods, which of course is completely contrary and opposite to what God desires.

The point is this: regardless of the variety of religion--of which there are many existing today, you can be devoutly religious and still lost. You can be religious and seriously wrong about some very important matters. You can believe you're pleasing God and following Jesus and actually be following the devil. Jesus said there will be a shocked religious multitude standing before Him in the Day of Judgment.

Matthew 7:22-23 "Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."

The idea that all churches and all religions are pleasing to God and that all people who claim to follow Christ are going to be saved because they do so in good conscience is patently false. It DOES matter what we believe. Yes, our conscience may be a court, but friend, there is a much higher court to which we must appeal. When you stop and think about it, there are really three courts before whom we stand today.

First, there's the court of *others* and their opinions and judgments. Our friends, neighbors, the world around us, the culture. There are some people who are very concerned, even fearful, as they stand before that court; worried about being justified by that court. They seek and are satisfied with the approval of their friends, family and neighbors. They think if everyone around them approves of what they believe and how they worship and the kind of life they live, then it must be all right.

The second court we'll call the court of *conscience*. We all want to feel good about ourselves, and if we don't keep that in perspective, we often go so far as to justify ourselves to ourselves and others in order to make us feel good about and at peace with ourselves. There are some who think they have passed the ultimate bar if they pass through this court uncondemned.

But, listen, friend: there is a HIGHER court. It is the supreme court of heaven and earth.

Romans 2:16 "In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel."

Hebrews 10:30 "...And again, The Lord shall judge his people."

John 12:48 "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day."

With all of that in mind, I want to ask you some very serious questions and I want you to think very carefully about them. Can you read about your church in the New Testament? I mean that. Its name, how it's described, how it's organized and governed, how and when it worships, the doctrine that it preaches. Is it the church that Jesus said He would build? How do you know? Or do you say, *I think my religion is right because it's the religion of my family, it's all I've ever known and I feel right about it. I*

can't see anything wrong with it...? If you can't see anything wrong with it in view of your own expectations, opinions, and feelings, that's not a very good guide.

Can you read about the way you worship in the New Testament?

John 4:24 "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."

In everything that you offer to God by way of worship and as you come together with God's people, can you open up the New Testament and read book, chapter, and verse for that, or are those the inventions of men? Innovations of men that have supplanted and replaced the primitive worship of the New Testament church? You may go to worship and feel very good about it and think that it's all fine—maybe you get an emotionally good feeling. But, that's not a good guide.

What does the Bible say? Is the life you are living in accordance with the commands and principles of Christ and His apostles? It doesn't matter if you or I think that's it's all right or not; the question is, what does the book say? What about where you stand today in relation to eternity? What if you were to die today and stand before the Lord in judgment? What if Jesus were to come again today, and you with all the masses of earth were to stand before the King of kings and the books would be opened and your life examined? Are you at peace about that?

I hope you can truly say that you ARE at peace about that. I really do. But, can you say you are at peace about that prospect because your conscience says so, or because you can open up the book and read so? Our conscience is a wonderful tool, but it is NOT a safe guide. The only safe way that we know is right and cannot be wrong is what we read in the good book. For it will judge us in the last day.

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