

ON THE GO FOR GOD

**A CLEAN
CONSCIENCE**

BY MARVIN R. KNIGHT

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“To go against conscience is neither
right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do
no other, so help me God.”

—**MARTIN LUTHER**

PROLOGUE

What is the conscience, and how does it work? What role does it play in the Christian's life, and how do we nurture a healthy conscience and guard it against spiritual suicide? The conscience may be the most under-appreciated and least understood attribute of humanity. Yet, it is one of the most tremendous gifts from God. In this study, Pastor Marvin R. Knight defines the conscience, explains how and when it functions, what it judges, and what conditions our conscience can be in. He concludes by sharing how we can maintain a good, pure, clean, healthy conscience.

“For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you.”

2 CORINTHIANS 1:12

1.

WHAT THE CONSCIENCE IS AND HOW IT FUNCTIONS

In 1984, an Avianca Airlines jet crashed in Spain. Investigators studying the accident made an eerie discovery. The “black box” cockpit recorders revealed that several minutes before impact, a shrill, computer-synthesized voice from the plane’s automatic warning system told the crew repeatedly in English, “Pull up! Pull up!”

The pilot, evidently thinking the system was malfunctioning snapped, “Shut up, Gringo!” and switched the system off. Minutes later, the plane plowed into the side of a mountain. Everyone on board died.

This tragic story is a parable of how Satan and society want people to treat the warning messages of their conscience. Yet, for the Apostle Paul, the care and maintenance of his conscience were essential.

What is the conscience, and how does it work? What role does it play in the Christian’s life, and how do we nurture a healthy conscience and guard it against spiritual suicide?

WHAT IS THE CONSCIENCE?

The conscience may be the most underappreciated and least understood attribute of humanity. Yet, it is one of the most tremendous gifts from God. Every human being has a conscience. It is one of the unique attributes of humans that distinguishes us from animals, enabling us to contemplate our actions and make moral self-evaluations. What is the conscience?

The conscience is NOT to be equated with the voice of God or the law of God. The conscience is a human faculty. The conscience is an innate ability within the framework of the human soul. It is designed by God to serve several functions.

- **Romans 2:14-15**—For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.

The conscience *witnesses* and *warns*. The conscience *accuses* or *defends*. The conscience *entreats* us to do what we believe is right and *restrains* us from doing what we believe is wrong. When we *violate* our conscience, it *condemns* us, triggering feelings of shame, anguish, regret, consternation, anxiety, disgrace, and even fear. When we *follow* our conscience, it commends us, bringing joy, self-respect, well-being, and gladness.

The word “**conscience**” is a combination of the Latin words *scire* (“to know”) and *con* (“together”). The Greek word for conscience is found more than 30 times in the New Testament—*suneidesis*. It literally means “co-knowledge.” The conscience is an instrument that God has given to each person that they might know themselves or have joint

knowledge held in common with God. The Puritans defined the conscience as “a man’s knowledge of himself standing in the presence of God (Coram Deo).”¹ MacArthur notes that the “conscience is above reason and beyond intellect. We may rationalize, trying to justify ourselves in our own minds, but a violated conscience will not be easily convinced.”²

The Hebrew word for conscience is *leb* and is usually translated “heart” in the Old Testament. The conscience is so embedded in the core of the human soul that for the Hebrews, it is impossible to distinguish between the conscience and the rest of the inner person. For example, when Moses recorded that Pharaoh “*hardened his heart*” (Ex.8:15), he was saying that Pharaoh had steeled his conscience against God’s will. When Scripture speaks of a “*tender heart*” (2 Chr.34:27), it refers to a sensitive conscience. When David spoke of those who are “*upright in heart*,” he was referring to those with pure consciences. When he prayed in Psalm 51:10, “*Create in me a clean heart, O God*,” he was seeking to have his conscience cleansed.

HOW DOES THE CONSCIENCE FUNCTION?

Here are five metaphors that drop light on its function.

1. **The conscience functions like a skylight, not a lightbulb.** It lets light into the soul; it does not produce its own. The effectiveness of the conscience is determined by how much pure light we expose it to and how clean we keep it.

¹ J.I. Packer, *Puritan Papers*, Vol.2, 238.

² John MacArthur, *The Vanishing Conscience*, 37.

Cover it or put it in darkness, and it ceases to function properly. This is why Paul spoke of the importance of maintaining a clear conscience and warned against anything that would defile or muddy the conscience.

- **1 Timothy 3:9**—but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

The deacon is one whose character is discerned by the conviction he maintains, the truth he masters, and the lifestyle he models.

- **1 Corinthians 8:7**—However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.
- **Titus 1:15**—To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled.

- 2. The conscience functions like a clock that works properly only if it is set correctly.** If misinformed, your conscience could mislead you time and time again. Our conscience cannot always be reliable, so it must be educated with the truth. It is not the ultimate judge. It is imperative that we properly inform our conscience, not with the opinions and doctrines of men (*Prov.14:12; 28:26; Jer.10:23*), but with the truth of God's Word (*P.s.119:104-105*).
- 3. The conscience functions like nerve endings in our fingertips.** Its sensitivity can be damaged by the build-up of callouses or even wounded so badly that it becomes numb to any feeling.
 - **1 Corinthians 8:10, 12**—For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things

sacrificed to idols? And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

- o **1 Timothy 4:1-2**—But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron,

4. **The conscience functions like a courtroom.** Richard Sibbes pictured the conscience as God's courtroom within us. In Sibbes' imagery, the conscience assumes every role in the courtroom drama. It registers what we have done in exact detail (*Jer.17:1*). It is the accuser that lodges a complaint when we are guilty and a defender to side with us when we are innocent (*Rom.2:15*). It acts as a witness to what we have done or not done (*2 Cor.1:12*). It judges us with the verdict, "well done," or "not well done" (*1 John 3:20-21*). It also serves as an executioner, striking with guilt and grief (*1 Sam.24:5*). There is no use in trying to deceive it; the conscience is privy to all our secret thoughts and motives. Try to gloss over an accusing conscience in favor of some counselor's advice or some relative's counsel, and you will play a deadly game with your soul. Sibbes said, "Conscience is not a private witness...it is a thousand witnesses...if it cannot speak the truth now, though it be bribed in this life, it will have power and efficacy in the life to come."³

5. **The conscience functions like the automatic warning system of the soul.** Like that aircraft that crashed into the mountain, ignore or reject your conscience, and it will result in disaster! It is like the pilot who turned off the warning system. It led to spiritual shipwreck for Hymenaeus and Alexander (*1 Tim.1:19-20*), which proved they never truly believed in the first place. It will lead to

³ Richard Sibbes, *Works of Richard Sibbes, Commentary on 2 Corinthians*, 212.

spiritual catastrophe for anyone who ignores it. Of all people, we who are committed to the truth of Scripture and sound doctrine cannot relinquish the importance of a healthy conscience.

2.

THE FUNCTION AND CONDITION OF THE CONSCIENCE

In the previous section, we defined the conscience and set before us some metaphors of how the conscience functions. To briefly recapitulate, the conscience is that innate ability within the framework of the soul to help us to know ourselves or have joint knowledge with God. It witnesses and warns, accuses and defends, entreats and restrains, condemns and commends. It is not the voice of God nor the law of God; it is above reason and beyond intellect. It is so embedded in the core of the human soul that the Hebrews found it impossible to distinguish between the conscience and the heart.

We considered five metaphors that shed light on how the conscience functions.

- The conscience functions like a skylight, not a lightbulb. It lets light in; it does not produce it.
- The conscience functions like a clock that works properly only if it is set correctly.
- The conscience functions like nerve-ending in our fingertips.
- The conscience functions like a courtroom. It registers, accuses, defends, witnesses, judges, and serves as an executioner.

- The conscience functions like an automatic warning system of the soul.

Now in this section, let's drill down a little deeper into **WHEN THE CONSCIENCE FUNCTIONS**.

In his book, *Honesty, Morality, and Conscience*, Jerry White said, "The conscience functions at all times, but its strength and its ability to influence us varies. At times it speaks faintly, and at times it rages."⁴

WHEN DOES THE CONSCIENCE FUNCTION?

1. **The conscience functions BEFORE a contemplated action is begun.** It attempts to communicate whether the action would be right or wrong. At this point, the battle is in the mind. How strongly the conscience speaks depends on the information it has been fed and by what we are thinking about most at the time.

Here is a case study. A young man had been a believer in Christ only a short time when he was sent to Asia for a three-month military assignment. Opportunities for sin and immorality surrounded him. When he returned, he said, "I'm so glad I studied the Bible before I went. When you're 10,000 miles from home, it's easy to think you're 10,000 miles from God. But the Scriptures and my conscience were my sources of strength in resisting temptation."

Application: Now, this is the point at which the battle for purity must be fought and won. What is harbored in the

⁴ Jerry White, *Honesty, Morality, and Conscience*, 37.

mind will soon become an action when the opportunity presents itself. So, the conscience needs an opportunity to speak before the action takes place.

2. **The conscience functions DURING an action, and here, it is usually at its weakest level of influence.** When we are involved in an action, we can become insensitive to the cries of the conscience. We may hear it but then rush forward and make some weak rationalization in our minds. Once an act of wrong has begun, stopping it is extremely difficult. It can be done, but at this point, desire has overcome the will. In order to reverse course, the will must overcome the desire.
3. **The conscience functions AFTER an action has been completed, and it pronounces judgment on the action.** If the action has been wrong, our conscience urges us to make restitution for the action. 2 Samuel 24:10 records how David's conscience struck him after he numbered Israel and how he responded.
 - o Now David's heart troubled him after he had numbered the people. So David said to the Lord, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O Lord, please take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have acted very foolishly."

On the other hand, after Adam and Eve sinned against God, they hid from Him (*Gen.3:7-8*). Here we see two desires or actions after the conscience has been violated. David repented; Adam and Eve ran or shunned God's presence. Bottom line: if we desire to have fellowship with God, maintaining a clear, clean, good conscience is essential.

WHAT DOES THE CONSCIENCE JUDGE?

The conscience speaks about much more than our actions.

1. **The conscience judges *our words***—what we say and how we say it. It judges our truthfulness, love, kindness, or whether we have spoken harshly, untruthfully, or angrily.
2. **The conscience judges *our thoughts***—and here is where we often suppress our conscience. Because no visible action has occurred, we conclude, no harm, no foul. But the conscience records recurring, persistent thought patterns, and the danger is, these thoughts can soon become desires that lead to wrong actions. The conscience warns us when these thoughts begin.
3. **The conscience judges *our attitudes***. Attitudes are our inner feelings or opinions about things. We privately harbor attitudes of love, hate, sympathy, bitterness, anger, unconcern, and many other things. Our attitudes can be healthy or unhealthy, but our conscience has ready access to these attitudes.
4. **The conscience judges *our motives***. Attitudes are inner feelings, but motives are the reasons for those feelings and why we take particular actions.

Here is why the Word of God is so important in educating our conscience. It is only the Word that can truly discern and redirect our thoughts and motives.

- o **Hebrews 4:12-13**—For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

WHAT KIND OF CONDITION CAN YOUR CONSCIENCE BE IN?

And how does it affect your life?

Here is another case study. Ron was a student at a prominent university. Through the witness and influence of some believers on campus, he trusted Christ as his Lord and Savior. He began to change radically as he grew spiritually. He stopped cursing, repaired a broken relationship with his father, and began studying the Bible and witnessing to his lost friends. However, he was still living with his girlfriend.

His new Christian friends were concerned about this but said nothing. Finally, another Christian spoke to him and showed him several passages that told him his action was wrong. Ron was amazed and responded immediately by moving out. He simply had not known that his action was wrong. In the current campus environment, his situation was so normal that it appeared right. Without previous knowledge or Scriptural teaching in this area, his conscience had no information to draw upon. Once his conscience was educated, it moved from one condition to another. The question is, what are the different states that our conscience can be in?

1. **A good, clear, or blameless conscience** does not mean sinless, but it does not accuse before God. A good conscience supplies strength and confidence to endure trials. (*Acts 23:1, 24:16, 1 Tim.1:5, 19, 3:9; 2 Tim.1:3; Heb.13:18, 1 Pet.3:16, 3:21*)

Susanna Wesley wrote these penetrating words which plainly describe the threats to a good conscience:

“Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, or obscures your sense of God or takes off the relish of spiritual things; whatever increases the authority of your body over your mind, that thing to you is sin.”

2. **A weak conscience** is easily grieved or wounded. A weak or immature conscience can be led into sin by imitating or misrepresenting the actions of another believer (*1 Cor. 8:9-12*). It is also hypersensitive and overactive about issues that are not sins. It is often the companion of legalism (*Rom.14:1-2*). A weak conscience is the result of a lack of spiritual knowledge. Both a weak and defiled conscience concentrate on faltering sin and are blinded to the triumphs of grace (*1 Cor.8:7; Tit.1:15*).
3. **A defiled conscience** occurs when one ignores the leading of the Word of God and the conscience (*Tit.1:15*). In this state, a defiled conscience loses its ability to discern right from wrong—and slowly begins to approve what is corrupt.
4. **A seared or evil conscience** is often found in pathological liars, serial killers, psychopaths, and others who seem to sin without remorse or scruples [sense of right and wrong] (*1 Tim.4:2; Heb.10:22*). People who have a seared conscience were not born that way. Rather, their conscience hardened as the result of relentless immorality or lawlessness. A seared conscience is numbed into dormancy, inactive, and insensitive to sin or hardened. Still, it continues to store up evidence that will one day be used as testimony to condemn their guilty soul.

5. **A cleansed and sound conscience** assures one of salvation (*Heb.9:14*). Unbelievers have a conscience, but it oscillates between being dead and asleep. This is why certain violations of God's law do not trouble the unbeliever like it does the believer. Sometimes unbelievers are troubled when their conscience is awakened through some violation, but it quickly falls back to sleep under the amusement of other sins. But when the Gospel is preached, and the Holy Spirit plunges its truth into the heart of a sinner, they first are convicted and exposed to their sin and unbelief. Then, they are convinced of their need for a foreign (imputed) righteousness that they do not possess. Then, they recognize that if the greatest sinner in the universe has been judged (Satan), they will not escape. Finally, the Spirit of God opens their eyes to what is real and true of Christ, regenerating them with faith to believe! (*Cf. John 16:8-11*). Once faith is placed in Christ, and they are justified by faith, they are cleansed, forgiven, reconciled, and assured of God's love.

What condition do you find your soul in today? What a gift to be cleansed from a defiled conscience! Now the question is...

HOW DO WE MAINTAIN A GOOD, PURE, CLEAN, HEALTHY CONSCIENCE?

In other words, what is the proper response to feelings of guilt or a violated conscience?

CONFESSION: Confess and forsake known sin.

- **Proverbs 28:13**—He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, But he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion.
- **1 John 1:9**—If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
- **James 5:16**—Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.
- **Psalms 32:5**—I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I did not hide; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord”; And You forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah.

FORGIVENESS: Ask for forgiveness and be reconciled to anyone you have wronged.

- **Matthew 5:23-24**—Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering.
- **Matthew 6:14-15**—For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.

RESTITUTION: Make restitution.

- **Numbers 5:6-7**—“Speak to the sons of Israel, ‘When a man or woman commits any of the sins of mankind, acting unfaithfully against the Lord, and that person is guilty, then he shall confess his sins which he has committed, and he shall make restitution in full for his wrong and add to it one-fifth of it, and give it to him whom he has wronged.’”
- **Luke 19:8**—Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much.”
- **Philemon 19**—I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).

PROMPTNESS: Don’t procrastinate in clearing your wounded conscience. A wounded conscience will not clear itself. Putting off dealing with it, God’s way, allows guilty feelings to fester. This, in turn, generates depression, anxiety, and other emotional problems. Putting off dealing with guilt compounds problems.

EDUCATION: Educate your conscience with sound doctrine. If you look to feelings, your conscience can accuse you wrongly and provoke doubts and fears. The conscience must be persuaded by God’s Word, not our feelings.

Here is the bottom line: be a truth-teller. Lying destroys trust, opens the door to Satanic deception, and makes relationships difficult to restore. Practice integrity (*Prov.19:1, 20:7, Ps.78:72*).

CONCLUSION:

Charles Wesley wrote this hymn about the conscience:

*I want a principle within
Of watchful, godly fear,
A sensibility of sin,
A pain to feel it near.
Help me the first approach to feel
Of pride or wrong desire;
To catch the wandering of my will,
And quench the kindling fire.*

*From Thee that I no more may stray,
No more Thy goodness grieve,
Grant me the filial awe, I pray,
The tender conscience give.
Quick as the apple of an eye,
O God, my conscience make!
Awake my soul when sin is nigh,
And keep it still awake.⁵*

⁵ Charles Wesley, *A Tender Conscience*, 1749

