

Your Conscience the Quiet Voice Within

By Thomas A. Davis

A four-year-old boy, playing in the garden, saw a little tortoise ambling toward him through the grass. With an impulse of aggressiveness that boys sometimes have, he lifted his hand to strike the animal. All at once a voice within spoke clearly to him: "It is wrong!" Startled, the lad ran inside and told his mother.

"What told me it was wrong?" he asked. With tears gathering in her eyes, his mother took him in her arms and said, "Some people call it conscience, but I prefer to call it the voice of God in the soul. If you listen and obey it, it will speak clearer, and will always guide you right. But if you turn a deaf ear and disobey, it will fade out little by little and will leave you without any guide. Your life depends upon hearing that little voice."

This mother impressed upon her son that conscience is a vitally important faculty. What is conscience, anyway? Is it a reliable guide? What happens if you do not pay attention to it? Why should you listen to conscience? Let's take a look at these and other questions which, while many people may not seem to consider very important, are vitally—in fact—eternally important.

MORAL INSTINCT

But is it really that important? Until fairly recently, psychology books could lead one to conclude that it is not, for many did not even list the word. This is probably because to secular psychologists and psychiatrists the term conscience had religious connotations.

They could not accept any supernatural overtones to the concept. To them, what the Christian thinks of as conscience was simply the echo of tribal mores or customs—the result of a conditioning process which is vastly different from the Christian concept being discussed here.

However, most behavioral scientists have now come to recognize the vital part conscience plays in society. For conscience is the moral balance wheel of reason, of the whole personality, and plays a vital part in the functioning of civilization. Research has shown that even though people may have different cultures, conscience generally works the same way for everyone.

Thus, one psychologist wrote that in conscience "a core not unlike the Ten Commandments is found as a common denominator..." So, in conscience we have built in a strong instinct for moral concern of right and wrong. Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev wrote that "conscience is that aspect of man's inmost nature which comes into contact with God, is receptive of His message and hears His voice."

BALANCE

But what if conscience gets off-balance?

Then we are in trouble. And it is plain from the psychological, as well as the moral and biblical viewpoint that conscience may very easily be put off balance.

The fact is, few consciences are totally in balance. If they were, we might not need many of the moral instructions found in the Bible. The problems that require them would not arise.

The Bible mentions several kinds of consciences that are not "balanced." There is the "weak" conscience—one that does not have enough strength to act from knowledge; the "defiled" or corrupt conscience; and the "seared" or insensitive conscience. 1 Corinthians 8:7; Titus 1:15; 1 Timothy 4:2. Psychology further recognizes the fanatical conscience, the ascetic conscience, the meddling conscience, the anxious conscience, and others.

From anthropology we learn that conscience is sometimes far from being a safe guide. A survey of material accumulated by anthropologists on the customs and mores of various heathen peoples through the ages shows that "there is hardly a vice that has not somewhere been deemed a virtue, and hardly a virtue but has been branded a vice."

This illustrates what Paul states in Romans 1:28, that because of the persistent degrading practices of the ancients, "God gave them over to a reprobate mind." There was a perversion of conscience in which right became wrong and wrong became right.

Satan must concentrate a great deal of his attention upon the human conscience for, as we have seen, it is a crucial faculty of the soul. It can certainly be a tremendous tool for him, if he can use it to his advantage by making it fanatically demanding or in turning it around 180°, as in the case of those who see wrong as right and right as wrong.

Satan can also endeavor to make it dull, passive and unresponsive. He will try to exaggerate on the one hand or paralyze on the other.

When the devil tempts us to perform a wrong act he will try to keep the conscience from sensing it as wrong. He will represent it as unimportant, perhaps pleasant. After the deed is done he may make it appear as terrible as he can unforgivable, if possible.

This way he tries to make us think we are beyond hope, that we might as well throw everything overboard and forget religion and God.

RIGHT TRAINING

Conscience is a safe guide only if it has been trained right, for conscience is a judge or a witness, but it is not law. And a witness can sometimes be mistaken. As a judge, conscience can only apply the law it knows. If it is not properly educated regarding the law it may make wrong judgments. Conscience can misdirect if it has been misdirected; it can deceive if it has been deceived. As H.C Trumbell said, "Conscience tells us that we ought to do right, but it does not tell us what is right—that we are taught by God's Word."

So it is not sufficient to be conscientious in belief and practice. A person may be conscientious in turning his footsteps toward a path that does not lead to heaven. That he is sincere does not prove that he is right. Sincerity will not change error into truth.

Conscience serves two functions in decision making. It dictates which actions it perceives should be taken, then sits in judgment on what has been done. "When the will stands at the parting of the ways, seeing clearly before it the right course and the wrong, conscience commands to strike into the right and forbids to choose the wrong. This is its imperative ... What conscience commands may be apparently against our interest, and it may be completely contrary to our inclinations; it may not be contrary to the advice of friends or the solicitations of companions; it may be opposed to the decrees of principalities and powers or to the voices or the multitudes; yet conscience in no way withdraws or modifies its claim. We may fail to obey, giving way to passion or being overborne by the allurements of temptation; but we know that we ought to obey; it is our duty, and this is a sublime and sacred word." (James Stalker, *Christian Psychology*, p. 244)

Truth is often paradoxical, as in this somewhat whimsical observation: "When you have a fight with conscience and get licked, you win." We will gain some insight into our subject by considering the various factors implied in this statement. In it, three areas of consciousness are implied: conscience, will and what might broadly be termed desire. This third area encompasses inclinations, feelings, motives, impulses.

Our statement implies that our inclinations—what we would like to do—will be morally wrong. So, when the sinful part of our nature makes certain demands that conscience cannot approve, and our will goes along with conscience, we are winners in that we have made the right, rather than the wrong decision.

This decision process is a vital one in the formation of character and living the Christian life. Conscience is an indispensable faculty, but it is of little practical use if the will does not work with it. Such a situation would be like a siren clanging loudly and warning that there is a fire, while the firemen sit idly by with their equipment. The siren is not going to put out the fire.

This illuminates the statement made by a dedicated Christian writer that "everything depends on the right action of the will." (Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 47) Conscience instructs the will, but getting action is the job of the will itself. Thus, we perceive that the will must listen to and follow reason and conscience.

As someone once said—With the intellect one learns what is right; with the will he chooses; and with the conscience his words, feelings, actions, and motives are judged.

OTHERS MAY, BUT YOU CANNOT

I have in my possession a little leaflet entitled "Others May; You Cannot," which beautifully portrays the manner in which God works with committed people to make them like Jesus. The word conscience does not appear in the leaflet, but the message that God speaks through the conscience is very implicit. Let me share a few paragraphs with you:

"The Holy Spirit will put a strict watch over you [who are completely committed to Him] with a jealous love, and will rebuke you for little words and feelings, or for wasting your time and money, which other Christians never seem distressed over.

"So make up your mind that God is an infinite Sovereign, and has a right to do as He pleases with His own. He may not explain to you a thousand things which may puzzle your reason in His dealings with you; but if you absolutely sell yourself to be His love slave, He will wrap you in a jealous love, and bestow upon you many blessings which come only to those who are in the inner circle.

"Settle it forever, then, that you are to deal directly with the Holy Spirit [remembering that the Spirit never works contrary to Scriptures], and that He is to have the privilege of tying your tongue, or chaining your hand, or closing your eyes, in ways that He does not seem to use with others. Now when you are so possessed with the living God that you are, in your secret heart, pleased and delighted over this peculiar, personal, private, jealous guardianship and management of the Holy Spirit over your life, you will have found the vestibule of heaven."