

The Role of the Conscience

Conscience

1. *STRONG's* 4893. suneidhsiv suneidesis, (soon-i'-day-sis) from a prolonged form of 4894; co-perception, i.e. moral consciousness:--conscience.
4894. suneidw suneido, (soon-i'-do) from 4862 and 1492; **to see completely**; used (like its primary) only in two past tenses, respectively meaning to understand or become aware, and to be conscious or (clandestinely) informed of:--consider, know, be privy, be ware of.
2. Conscience is the ability or a faculty that distinguishes whether one's actions are right or wrong. The conscience acts as defendant, prosecutor and judge with respect to actions.
3. Conscience can lead to feelings of remorse when a human does things that go against his/her moral values, and to feelings of rectitude or integrity when actions conform to such norms

Simple Definition:

“A conviction residing in the heart (soul) with respect to a custom or a standard of conduct for any given situation.”

Basically, the conscience **monitors and responds** “for” or “against” one's thoughts, motives, actions and general manner of life by comparing them to their established belief system residing in the heart. The conscience has nothing to do with “actual truth” but responds to what is “truth” to the individual's heart.

Pr 23:7 For as he thinks in his heart, so is he. "Eat and drink!" he says to you, But his heart is not with you.

CON = “within” – SCIENCE – “knowledge” or “knowledge within”

Examples of the Conscience at work in the Bible

1. Adam & Eve –felt shame & hid for fear (Gen 3:7-10)
2. Cain killed Able –begin to fear for his life (Gen 4:14)
3. Joseph's brothers – remembered their sin against their brother (Gen 42:21)
4. Saul persecuted David – wept when David did not retaliate (1 Sam 26:1ff)
5. David's sin of adultery & murder – felt remorse and deep conviction of wrong doing (2 Sam 12:13)
6. David cutting off the robe of Saul – 1 Sam 24:5
7. Jesus with woman caught in adultery – accusers dispersed in shame (John 8)
8. Judas Iscariot – committed suicide because of remorse (Matt 27:5)
9. Peter denied Jesus - wept bitterly Matt 26:75, Mrk 14:72, Lu 22:62
10. Peter confronting the Sanhedrin – held the conviction to obey God over men (Acts 4)

The “Witness of the Conscience”

Ro 2:15-16 who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them)in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.

- Conscience discerns “right from wrong”
- Person with a normal healthy conscience cannot act contrary to their conscience
- The conscience is that element which brings conviction to the heart based on “perceived or real truth”
- A person with a "seared conscience" no longer feels that conviction; it has been "seared" KAUTERIAZO." This word literally means "to brand (cauterize), i.e. (by implication) to render insensitive" (Strong)

Ro 1:21 “because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” (*violated their conscience*)

A Bad conscience is produced by “lies and hypocrisy”

1Ti 4:1-2 Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron,

Shipwrecks us

1Ti 1:19 having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck,

Our conscience can condemn us even if we have not violated anyone of anything

1Jo 3:20 For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things.

A Good Conscience is essential to operating in faith towards God

Good conscience produces confidence towards God

1Jo 3:21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God.

A spiritually mature person is able to distinguish more accurately the motivation of the heart

Heb 5:14 But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

Other Definitions:

- Conscience is the moral standard by which a person conducts their life. It is not the mind but it involves thinking. It is not emotional but may involve emotions.
- It is a set of rules or values (law) residing in the heart individual by which decisions are made for corresponding moral (good or evil) actions. (like computers: an accumulated “knowledge bank”). It may differ from one culture to another and one person to another.
- Conscience does not occur just in crisis. We live out of our conscience (heart).
- The conscience is an effective internal “moral compass” when based on the truth of the Word of God and operating in love towards others and towards self.
- We say things like “Let your conscience be your guide”; “My conscience is clear”; or “I was troubled in my conscience.”
- When a child shows unacceptable behavior followed by remorse, it is said that “the child has a healthy or good conscience.”
- Law Enforcement and Forensic Psychiatrists talk with criminals who appear to have no conscience in that they show no remorse, regret, sorrow, guilt or shame for their conduct or actions.

Good Conscience – Evil Conscience

Good Conscience - "that process of thought which distinguishes what it considers morally good or bad, commending the good, condemning the bad, and so prompting to do the former, and to avoid the latter."

– Vine

Bad (Evil) Conscience – Unable to discern correctly between good or bad (good and evil). Calling “evil good and good evil”. Also referred to as “seared, corrupted, without feeling, weak” conscience

Psychological Viewpoint

Psychologists offer various hypotheses to describe the universal experience of having and developing an “internal monitor of thought and behavior”.

1. Feelings of guilt or shame occur when society’s demands are not met and when the person does not conform to what he or she “should be” Sigmund Freud, (i.e., *peer pressure – conform to external pressure*)
2. “Social learning psychologists” link conscience development to the parenting process. (i.e., *learned code of ethics – no standard therefore may vary with each individual. What is “truth to you may not be truth to me”*)
3. “Behavioral psychologists” view conscience as a result of behavioral modification and conditioning using rewards and punishments so that patterns of self-criticism develop and persist even when the punishers are no longer present. (i.e., *circumstances dictate thinking*)

Biblical Viewpoint

1. Theologians propose that conscience is not merely socially developed but “built in” as a God-designed capacity to put human beings in touch with the moral code of the universe.
2. The Bible uses the term conscience as part of the inner-man which is called the soul or heart. (body – soul –spirit). It monitors and makes judgments as to what we individually perceive as truth.
3. The conscience is UNIVERSAL in all individuals. They all have the capability to choose and display good or bad or moral or immoral behavior.
4. Every person’s conscience is unique.
5. Conscience came into being with the “fall of man”. They had to begin to discern “good from evil”. Before the fall there was no need for a conscience. Man only new good – that is to say he was dependant on God to monitor and make judgments.
6. The conscience is NOT the new spirit of a born-again person.
7. The Bible itself does not definitively expound on the concept of a conscience.
8. The word conscience is not found in the Old Testament, and used 31 times in 29 verses in the New Testament. The narratives of the Old Testament, especially where emotions are brought to bear upon evil actions, show the effect of a conscience. (i.e., Adam sinned and felt shame. Adam was “afraid” and hid himself. He also became a judge “blaming God and the women”)
9. The conscience that knows good and evil has to judge perceived outcomes to behavior.
10. A mature spiritual person has their senses (conscience) trained to discern good from evil. Heb 5:13

Conscience in the Bible

1. **Greek View** –“Conscience” in the first century Greek world was described as “the judge or witness within” or “knowing oneself,” both phrases translating Greek words for conscience. It was part of the Greek segmentation of the human person into sections, with the outer shell, the body, being the least valuable.
2. **Hebrew View** of the human person was different. Persons are integrated wholes. In the Old Testament there are only six instances of conscience in the English NIV, and in each case the word translates the general word “conscience “ as “soul” or “heart.”

The word conscience, for example, is not used in Genesis 3:7 when Adam and Eve sinned because their whole persons were alienated from God and filled with shame.

When Job declares, “My conscience [literally, heart] will not reproach me as long as I live” (Job 27:6), he is claiming his complete conviction that he is free from condemnation in relation to God; none of his sins can explain his suffering.

3. The term “conscience” came into being as the Gospel spread to the Gentile or Greek speaking world.
 - a. Acts and the Epistles references the following for “conscience”
 - i. “good” conscience (Acts 23:1),
 - ii. “weak” conscience (1 Cor. 8:7),
 - iii. “clear” conscience (1 Tim. 3:9),
 - iv. “seared” conscience (1 Tim. 4:2),
 - v. “corrupted” conscience (Titus 1:15)
 - vi. “cleansed” conscience (Hebrews 10:22).
 - b. Prosecutor or Defender –Romans 1:18-22 Paul says that the Gentiles are inexcusable for not reverencing God and that on the day of judgment they will find their consciences bearing witness to this by either “accusing” them or possibly “even defending them” (Romans 2:15).
 - c. Works together with the Holy Spirit -“confirms” - Paul tells the Romans that his “conscience confirms . . . in the Holy Spirit” that he is speaking the truth (Romans 9:1). This last witness is especially insightful because the New Testament authors used conscience to describe the whole person in relation to God, not an independent witness built into human nature with or without God.
 - d. The Atonement of Jesus cleanses the conscience -“guilty and polluted” – Hebrews says that all human beings have a guilty and polluted conscience which cannot be cleansed by sacrificial offerings in the temple, and even the ritual of the Day of Atonement offered only temporary relief (Hebrews 9:9-10). But the “once for all” sacrifice of Jesus results in a permanent cleansing that empowers us to enter the presence of God and serve all the time and every day.

Misguided Conscience

1. Conscience reduced to “feelings” – “I feel this is the right thing to do and no one can dictate a standard to me
2. Conscience is filled with scruples – every decision is anguished over, double mindedness, unstable, weak conscience
3. Conscience is what is “socially acceptable” – most dangerous because people are “judging themselves by themselves” having no moral standard. Whatever is acceptable by the majority.
4. Not all conviction in the inner man is a result of the Holy Spirit witnessing to our heart (consciences) that something is right (peace) or wrong (unsettling). Our emotions can deceive because they follow what we think. (Pr 23:7 For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.)
5. Satan “accuses” Christians day and night (Rev. 12:10). Sometimes we serve Satan’s purposes by doing our own accusing of ourselves.
6. We judge one another.

Albert Camus once made the insightful comment that he would wait for the final judgment by God resolutely because he had known something far worse: “the judgment of human beings.”

Is it safe to “let your conscience be your guide”?

Once again the conscience **monitors and responds** positively or negatively to one's thoughts, motives, actions and general manner of life based on the belief system in the heart. 1 Corinthians 8 is a good example of how healthy and unhealthy consciences work.

1Co 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."

1Co 8:10

"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?"

1Cor 8:12

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

1Cor 10:25

"Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for conscience' sake;"

1Cor 10:27

"If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience' sake."

1Cor 10:28

"But if anyone says to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience' sake;"

1Cor 10:29

"I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience?"

The consciences DOES NOT determine good or bad or right or wrong.

The conscience DOES NOT determine what is right or wrong. It only RESPONDS to what our heart believes is right or wrong. To determine what is right and what is wrong one has to make a "judgment." Involving the mind whether consciously or unconsciously. The conscience commends us when we do what our "judgment" tells us is right; and it condemns us when we do what our "judgment" tells us is wrong.

The conscience is a CAN BE a safe guide in determining whether our conduct is in harmony with our "judgment." The only problem with this is that our "judgment" is that it may be misaligned and not in accordance with the truth of the Word of God.

The conscience is not intended to serve as a “standard of right and wrong”. One can have a “wrong standard” in the way of a belief system and have a conscience that is in agreement.

The Bible teaches that it is possible to defile the conscience, and to "sear" the conscience so that it becomes insensitive to the truth the Word of God.

1Tim 4:2

"by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron," (*A “bad” conscience is produced by hypocrisy and lies*)

Tit 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."

(*Note the distinction is made between the “mind and conscience” as two separate entities*)

When Paul persecuted the saints he had a clear conscience:

Acts 23:1

"Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day."

1Cor 4:4

"For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord (*This shows that the conscience is not the determiner of right or wrong*)

How to develop a "good conscience"

What we think does not determine what is right and wrong. Our "judgment" must be properly educated in God's Word, and then the conscience will approve what God approves and condemn what God condemns. It is wrong to disregard the prompting of the conscience:

2Ti 3:16 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, (*It is the scripture (Word) that instructs us in right or wrong thereby establishing the correct belief system*)

Ps 119:160 The entirety of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever. (*Only what God says is truth and able to judge rightly in all things*)

Heb 13:18

"Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things."

1Pet 3:16

"and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame."

Heb 10:22

"let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."

1Tim 1:19

"keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith."

The Main Purpose of the Conscience

The reason it is wrong to disregard the conscience is because it is designed to lead us to reflect on our "judgments"; but it is our "judgment" (our concept of what is right or wrong) which determines whether the conscience approves or condemns us.

When there is a mutual alignment of our thoughts, actions and manner of life with the teaching of the Scriptures that we are right. From this position our conscience will function correctly to acclaim or express disapproval of our actions base on the standard of the Word of God.

All the conscience tells us is that we are "in or out of conformance" with our "judgments". What is right or wrong is not determined by what we believe, but by what the Bible teaches. This is one of the main reasons that we are to "take captive every thought to the obedience of Christ" so that our conscience will commend us to our selves. The "obedience of Christ" means "what Jesus has provided for us through the cross".

The Obedience of Christ

Basically what He did for all of mankind through His obedience unto death: He removed all guilt, shame, condemnation, and eternal judgment for sin. This TRUTH goes counter to what our conscience may tell us from time to time.

Notable Quotations

- "Conscience: the inner voice which warns us that someone may be looking" [H.L. Mencken *A Little Book in C Major*]
- "Thus conscience does make cowards of us all" [William Shakespeare *Hamlet*]
- "Conscience is thoroughly well-bred and soon leaves off talking to those who do not wish to hear it" [Samuel Butler]

- There is no witness so dreadful, no accuser so terrible as the conscience that dwells in the heart of every man (Polybius, c. 208-126 BC, History, bk. XVIII, 43).
- He that loses his conscience has nothing left that is worth keeping. (Caution, c. 1645, The Holy Court)
- Trust that man in nothing who has not a conscience in everything. (Laurence Sterne, 1713-1768, Tristram Shandy, bk 17)
- Conscience is a sacred sanctuary where God alone may enter as judge. (Felicite R. Lamennais)
- Conscience is a soft whispers of the God in man (Edward Young).
- Do not treat your conscience with contempt, for it always advises you to do what is best. It sets before you the will of God and the angels; it frees you from the secret defilements of the heart; and when you depart this life it grants you the gift of intimacy with God. *St. Maximos the Confessor*
- After God, let us have our conscience as our mentor and rule in all things, so that we may know which way the wind is blowing and set our sails accordingly. *St. John of the Ladder*
- He who lives in evil is punished in hell prematurely, being pierced by the conscience *St. John Chrysostom* The conscience should not be evaded, since it tells us inwardly how to live in conformity to Gods will, and by severely censuring the soul when the mind has been infected by sins, and by admonishing the erring heart to repent, it provides welcome counsel as to how our defective state can be cured. *St. Philopheos of Sinai*
- A peace above all earthly dignities, A still and quiet conscience. *Shakespeare*
- The disease of an evil conscience is beyond the practice of all the physicians in the world. *Gladstone*

Proverbs

"A guilty conscience needs no accuser"