

CONSCIENCE: GOD'S WATCHMAN AND SPOKESMAN IN THE SOUL 2 Corinthians 1:12

I. Introducing the Conscience

A. Possible definitions and explanations

1. A dictionary definition: "The sense or [consciousness](#) of the moral goodness or blameworthiness of one's own conduct, intentions, or character together with a feeling of obligation to do right or be good."¹
2. "Conscience is the psychological faculty by which we aware of and respond to the moral character of our own actions. It is most commonly thought of as the source of pains we suffer as a result of doing what we believe is wrong --- the pains of guilt, or "pangs of conscience." It may also be seen, more controversially, as the source of our knowledge of what is right and wrong, or as a motive for moral conduct. Thus a person who is motivated to act on principle is said to act 'conscientiously.'²
3. "Often the Puritans appealed to the form of the word (con-science, from the Latin *con-scientia*) as pointing to the fact that the knowledge which conscience possesses is shared knowledge, joint-knowledge, knowledge (*scientia*) held in common with (*con-*) another—namely God. The judgments of conscience thus express the deepest and truest self-knowledge that a man ever has—i.e., knowledge of himself as God knows him."³
4. J. I. Packer, "God's watchman and spokesman in the soul."⁴

B. **Theme Verse:** *For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you.* (2 Corinthians 1:12)

1. That would make a pretty good epitaph.
2. God has given each of us a conscience, His watchman and spokesman in the soul, in order that we might walk with Him in intimate, joyful, satisfying fellowship.
3. As a follower of Jesus, I want to develop and maintain a strong, good, clear conscience.
4. As a father, I want my children to grow strong, healthy, Christ-like consciences.
5. I am zealous of this for our church.
6. How do we do that?

C. Prayer: "Father, grow this kind of testimony in us, individually and corporately."

II. Surveying the Scriptures on the Conscience

A. OT thoughts

1. There actually is no Hebrew word translated directly into the English language as "conscience."
2. John Frame observes, "Translations of the Old Testament rarely use the term *conscience*. But in 2 Samuel 24:10, after David has sinfully conducted a census of the people, we read that his 'heart struck him.' Here, David's heart serves as what the New Testament calls conscience (cf. 1 Sam. 24:5; 1 Kings 9:4; 15:3, 14). So there is no metaphysical difference between the heart and the conscience. The two are perspectives on one another. The heart is the center of human personality. The conscience is the heart in its function as a moral guide."⁵
3. Psalm 51:10 *create in me a clean heart, O God.*

B. NT thoughts

1. συνείδησις: "the psychological faculty which can distinguish between right and wrong"⁶

¹Merriam-Webster

²Christine M. Korsgaard, Harvard University, <http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~korsgaard/CMK.Conscience.E.Ed.pdf>

³J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*, Crossway Books, 1990, 109.

⁴Packer, 110.

⁵John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* [A Theology of Lordship; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008], 364.

⁶Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 323.

- a. The word occurs 30 times in the NT.
- b. 20 of those are in Paul's writing.
2. **Acts 23:1** *And looking intently at the council, Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day."*
3. **Acts 24:16** *So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man.*
4. The NT will show us that the conscience can be good and it can be evil. It can be strong or weak, clear or guilty, wounded, defiled, emboldened to sin, and ultimately seared. I don't want a conscience that is insensitive to sin!

III. General observations regarding the Conscience.

- A. Your conscience is a reflection of the image of God in you.
 1. It's one of the characteristics of humans which separate us from all other life on the planet.
 2. Despite what you may think, no plants or animals have a conscience. We've had 4 dogs in our family history and all 4 have given us that look that they're guilty of some kind of doggy crime. But they do not have a conscience. They do not have the capacity to make moral judgments about right and wrong.
 3. God has given every human the capacity to make moral judgments and your conscience is the center of such decision making.
- B. Every person has a conscience.
 1. Some function very differently from others, but every person has one. Even unbelievers.
 2. **Ro 2:14-15**¹⁴ *For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law.* ¹⁵ *They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them*
 3. Every person has a conscience and in that conscience knows he or she is accountable to someone greater. That someone is God.
- C. Your conscience operates like a judge.
 1. Notice the words *accuse or even excuse*
 2. Your conscience is either going to condemn or clear you.
 3. It operates in terms of right and wrong, of black and white.
 4. Conscience doesn't negotiate or work toward a compromise; there are no gray issues.
- D. Your conscience is yours.
 1. Because God's intention is for your conscience to be His watchman and spokesman in your soul, you must not surrender your conscience to others.
 2. Neither should you lord your conscience over others.
- E. God makes room for significant differences of conscience from person to person, so you must learn to do the same.
 1. Most of the problems and conflict in churches arise in this realm.
 2. 30 occurrences in the NT; 20 in Paul's writing.
 3. 7 of those occurrences have to do with a dispute in the church concerning idol meat.
 4. And although Romans 14-15 do not include the actual term *conscience*, it is clear from the context that a discussion and dispute, similar to the one in Corinth, is under way in Rome.
 5. Much of Paul's discussion has to do with the importance of believers maintaining a close fellowship and relationship of love despite their strong differences of opinion, even strong matters of conscience.
 6. This is one of the reasons that we need to spend a little time studying and thinking and applying the scriptures concerning our conscience.
- F. Your conscience must always be submitted to God alone.

1. That means you need to tend your conscience consistently.
2. You need to submit it always to the word of God.
3. You need to be willing to change your conscience on matters where the Lord is speaking clearly to you.

IV. ACTIVITY OF THE CONSCIENCE

A. The conscience may lead a person to action.

1. **Ro 13:5** *Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.*
2. **1 Co 10:25–27** ²⁵ *Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience.* ²⁶ *For "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof."* ²⁷ *If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.*
3. **1 Co 10:28** *But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience—*

B. The conscience serves as a witness against false accusation.

1. **1 Pe 3:15** *but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,*
2. **1 Pe 3:16** *having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.*

C. The conscience may act as a judge of others.

1. **1 Co 10:28–29** *But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience— I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience?*
2. The answer to that question lies in love for your brother. Why else would I submit my liberty to the judgment of someone else?

D. The conscience serves as an internal witness to God's truth.

1. Sometimes it bears witness to other influences.
 - a. Cultural practices
 - b. Extra-biblical material
 - c. Family traditions
2. God's desire is that your conscience be subject to Him alone.
3. **Ro 2:15** *They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them*
 - a. *Conscience:* (συνειδήσεως)
 - b. *Bears witness:* (συμμαρτυρέω) to witness, to testify
 - c. *Accuse:* (κατηγορούντων) "To speak openly against, to condemn or accuse mainly in a legal sense"⁷
 - d. *Excuse:* (ἀπολογουμένων) "To defend or speak or plead for oneself before a tribunal or elsewhere"⁸
4. **Ro 9:1** *I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—*
5. **2 Co 1:12** *For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you.*

E. Summary

⁷Zodhiates

⁸Zodhiates

1. Ideally: Your conscience is God's internal witness to right and wrong.
2. Practically: Your conscience is the active awareness of what you believe is right and wrong.
3. "In the apostle Paul's thought, conscience is not an infallible guide but a guide that requires instruction by the revealed will of God. Because he viewed humanity as fallen, Paul differed sharply from certain philosophical evaluations of conscience as an adequate barometer of the moral life. Conscience judges between right and wrong, but its judgment is made according to the standard furnished. For the Christian, **conscience must operate within a framework of revelation, having its validity conditioned by scriptural instruction.** Though human beings are made in the rational, moral, and spiritual image of God, hence with an interior moral sense, that sense is marred by a sinful nature. That is why Paul urged Christians not to be "conformed to this world" but to be "transformed" by the renewing of their minds, in order to "prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2).⁹
4. "Its role is not to teach us moral and ethical ideals, but to hold us accountable to the highest standards of right and wrong we know."¹⁰

V. Application

- A. Think of your conscience as you would a garden.
 1. God owns the garden of your conscience.
 2. Jesus Christ died to rid the garden of your conscience of sin and dead works.
 3. The Holy Spirit resides in the garden of your conscience to grow and strengthen and beautify it.
- B. Studying the conscience is important to us because the function of your conscience has bearing on
 1. Your relationship with God
 2. Your relationship with others
 3. Your effectiveness in Great Commission living

⁹Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 510–511.

¹⁰John MacArthur, *The Vanishing Conscience*, 38.