



Free Grace Broadcaster

CONSCIENCE

*Herein do I exercise myself,
to have always a conscience
void of offence toward God,
and toward men.*

Acts 24:16

Our Purpose

*“To humble the pride of man,
to exalt the grace of God in salvation,
and to promote real holiness in heart and life.”*

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OUR BEST FRIEND OR WORST ENEMY

Arthur W. Pink (1886-1952)

Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly.—Hebrews 13:18

CONSCIENCE is the faculty of the soul that enables us to perceive of conduct in reference to right and wrong, the inward principle that decides upon the lawfulness or unlawfulness of our desires and deeds.¹ Conscience has well been termed the moral *sense* because it corresponds to those physical faculties whereby we have communion with the outward world, namely, the five senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. Man has an ethical instinct, a faculty or moral sensibility informing and impressing him. “It is far higher in the scale and keener in its perceptions than any mere bodily sense. There is an inner eye that sees into the nature of right and wrong; an inner ear, sensitive to the faintest whisper of moral obligation; an inner touch that feels

¹ **EDITOR’S NOTE:** Theologians and commentators have defined *conscience* in numerous ways throughout church history. For example: “Conscience is a part of the understanding in all reasonable creatures, determining of their particular actions either with them or against them” *William Perkins*; “A man’s judgment of himself according to the judgment of God on him” *William Ames*; “It is a power deputed in the soul of man by God, taking orders from Him and from His revealed will and Word, and accusing or excusing the man as He directs” *James Durham*; “For what is conscience, but the soul itself reflecting upon itself?” *Richard Sibbes*. Beeke and Jones sum up the Puritan view: “The Puritans viewed conscience as reason in action on practical moral matters—that is, reason passing judgments upon what is right and wrong. So, when the Puritans call conscience ‘God’s deputy and vice-regent within us,’ ‘God’s spy in our bosoms,’ and ‘God’s sergeant He employs to arrest the sinner,’ we must not dismiss these ideas as quaint fancies. They represent a serious attempt to do justice to the human and biblical conception of conscience that our experience reflects: seeing conscience as a *witness* declaring facts (Rom 9:1; 2Co 1:12); a *mentor* prohibiting evil and prescribing standards (Act 24:16; Rom 13:5); and a *judge* telling us of our ill-desert (1Jo 3:20-21). The New Testament confirms that definition. For example, Paul testifies in Romans 2:15: ‘Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.’ In short, the Puritans taught that the conscience functions as a spiritual nervous system, which uses guilt to inform us that something is wrong and needs correction. Failing to heed the warnings of conscience can lead only to the hardening or searing of the conscience, which in the end will bring us to destruction. [Richard] Sibbes compared the authority of the conscience to a divine court within the human soul.” (Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* [Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012], 912.)

the pressure of duty and responds to it sympathetically.”²

Conscience is the mysterious principle that bears its witness within us for good or evil. Therefore, it is the very center of human accountability, for it greatly adds to his condemnation that man continues sinning against the dictates of this internal sentinel.³ Conscience supplies us with self-knowledge and self-judgment, resulting in self-approbation⁴ or self-condemnation according to our measure of light. It is a part of the understanding in all rational creatures that passes judgment on all actions for or against them. It bears witness of our thoughts, affections, and actions, for it reflects upon and weighs whatever is proposed to and by the mind. That it bears witness of *emotions* is clear from, “My conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart” (Rom 9:1-2). So again, we read, “Take no heed unto all words that are spoken; lest thou hear thy servant curse thee: For oftentimes also thine own heart [conscience] knoweth that thou thyself likewise hast [inwardly] cursed others” (Ecc 7:21-22). The soul hears its voice secretly acquainting us with the right and wrong of things.

That conscience exists in the unregenerate is clear from Paul’s statement concerning the Gentiles: “Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts: their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another” (Rom 2:15). Though the heathen never received the Scriptures as Israel did, yet they had within them that which accused or excused them. There is within every man (save the idiot) that which reproves him for his sins, yes, for those most secret sins to which none are privy but themselves. Wicked men seek to stifle those inward chidings but are rarely if ever successful. “The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness hath surprised the hypocrites” (Isa 33:14). Unregenerate men are without faith, yet not without fear: “The wicked flee when no man pursueth” (Pro 28:1). There is within man that which appalls the stoutest sinner after committing any gross evil: his own heart reproves him.

The Creator has gifted the human soul with various faculties, such as the understanding, affections, and will; and He has also bestowed upon it this power of considering its own state and actions, both inward and outward, constituting conscience both a monitor and judge within man’s own bosom—a monitor to warn of duty, a judge to condemn for

² **Arthur Tappan Pierson (1837-1911)** – American Presbyterian preacher and author.

³ **sentinel** – soldier or guard whose job is to stand and keep watch.

⁴ **self-approbation** – self-approval.

neglect of the same...It is an intrinsic⁵ part of our own very selves. Conscience anticipates the Grand Assize⁶ in the Day to come, for it forces man to pass verdict upon himself, as he is subject to the judgment of God. It is resident in the understanding, as is clear from 1 Corinthians 2:11, where the conscience is termed our “spirit.”

The presence of conscience within man supplies one of the clearest demonstrations of the existence of God. To this fact the Holy Spirit appeals in Psalm 53. “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God” (v. 1). Now, how does he prove there is a God? Thus, “There were they in great fear, where no fear was” (v. 5). Though there was no outward cause for fear, none seeking to hurt them, yet even those who lived most atheistically were under a fear. An illustration is seen in the case of Joseph’s brethren, who accused themselves when there was none other to accuse them: “They said one to another, We are verily guilty concerning our brother” (Gen 42:21). Though a man should hide himself from all the world, he cannot get away from himself—his heart will pursue and condemn him. Now the very fact that there is such a hidden fear in man after sinning—that their hearts smite them for crimes done in secret—argues there is a God.

This fear is found in the most obstinate sinners, and in those who, because of their high station and power, are exempt from human justice. History records how kings and emperors have followed their wickedness without interference, yet even the infamous Caligula⁷ trembled when it thundered. It was not a fear that they might be found out by man and punished by him, for in some notable instances this fear prevailed to such an extent that human punishment would have been a welcome relief, and failing which they perforce laid violent hands upon themselves. What can be the reason for this but that they feared a Judge and Avenger Who would call them to account? As the apostle said of the heathen, “...who knowing the judgment of God” (Rom 1:32): there is a witness in their own souls that they are liable to His justice. Mark the fearful consternation of Belshazzar: the paling of his countenance, smiting of his knees, loosing of his joints, when he read the sentence on the palace walls (Dan 5:6).

“There is nothing in man that more challenges and demands adequate explanation than his moral sense. Conscience is a court always in session and imperative in its summons. No man can evade it or

⁵ **intrinsic** – belonging to something as a basic and essential feature of what it is.

⁶ **Grand Assize** – Day of Judgment.

⁷ **Caligula** (AD 12-41) – Roman emperor, known for tyranny and cruelty.

silence its accusations. It is a complete assize. It has a judge on its bench, and that judge will not be bribed into a lax decision. It has its witness stand and can bring witnesses from the whole territory of the past life. It has its jury, ready to give a verdict, ‘guilty’ or ‘not guilty,’ in strict accordance with the evidence; and it has its sheriff, *remorse*, with his whip of scorpions, ready to lash the convicted soul. The nearest thing in this world to the bar of God⁸ is the court of conscience. And though it be for a time drugged into a partial apathy or intoxicated with worldly pleasure, the time comes when in all the majesty of its imperial authority this court calls to its bar every transgressor and holds him to a strict account.”⁹

But though the presence of conscience in us bears witness to the existence of a holy, righteous, sin-hating, and sin-avenging God, it is scarcely correct to say (as numbers have done) that the conscience is the voice of God speaking in the soul; rather is it that faculty that *responds* to what He says. When Christ declared, “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Mat 11:15), He signified him that has a conscience attuned to the Most High, who desires to know His will and submit to His authority. Conscience sits upon the bench of the heart as God’s vicegerent,¹⁰ acquitting or accusing. It acts thus in the natural man; but in the regenerate, it is a godly conscience, guided in its operations by the Holy Spirit, bearing its testimony for or against the believer according to his character and conduct, Godwards *and* manwards.

The actual term *conscience* is derived from *scio*, “to know,” and *con*, “with.” There is some difference of opinion as to the precise application of the prefix, whether it be knowledge we have in common with God or a knowledge according to His Law. Really, it is a distinction with little difference. The “knowledge” is of one individual alone by himself, but this “knowledge *with*” is where two at least share the same secret, either of them knowing it together with the other. Conscience, then, is that faculty which *combines two together* and makes them partners in knowledge. It is between man *and* God. God knows perfectly all the doings of a man, no matter how carefully concealed; and man, by this faculty, also knows together with God the same things of himself. Hence, we read of “conscience toward God” (1Pe 2:19)...Conscience is God’s vicegerent, acting for and under Him.

Thus, as the very term implies, conscience must have a *rule* to work

⁸ **bar of God** – railing that encloses the part of the courtroom where judges and lawyers sit to try cases; therefore, the judgment seat of God.

⁹ **Pierson.**

¹⁰ **vicegerent** – person appointed by a ruler to act as an administrative deputy.

by: “knowledge together with.” It is not only knowledge, but knowledge coupled with *a standard*, according to which a process of inward judgment is carried on. Now, our only proper rule is the Word or revealed will of God. That is divided into two parts: what God speaks to man in His holy Law, and what He says to him in His blessed gospel. If conscience departs from that rule, then it is a rebellious one. It has ceased to speak and judge for God; then the light in man is turned into darkness, for the (inward) eye has become evil (Mat 6:23). In his primitive condition, man had only the Law. The proper work of conscience, then, was to speak warningly and condemningly in strict accordance with that rule and to allow none other. But our first parents listened to Satan’s lie, broke the Law, and came under its condemnation.

Wherever we go, conscience accompanies us. Whatever we think or do, it records and registers [with a view to] the Day of accounts. “When all friends forsake thee, yes, when thy soul forsakes thy body, conscience will not, cannot forsake thee. When thy body is weakest and dullest, thy conscience is most vigorous and active! [There is] never more life in the conscience than when death makes its nearest approach to the body. When it smiles, cheers, acquits, and comforts, oh, what a heaven doth it create within a man! And when it frowns, condemns, and terrifies, how doth it becloud, yea, benight¹¹ all the pleasures, joy, and delights of this world?...It is certainly the best of friends or the worst of enemies in the whole creation. This is conscience.”¹²

From *An Exposition of Hebrews*, in *Studies in the Scriptures*, January 1938;
in the public domain; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

Arthur W. Pink (1886-1952): Pastor, itinerate Bible teacher, author; born in Nottingham, England, UK.



Conscience, as it doth respect ourselves is...the understanding power of our souls examining how matters do stand between God and us, comparing His will revealed with our state, condition, and carriage in thoughts, words, or deeds, done or omitted, and passing judgment thereupon as the case requires.—*David Dickson*

He takes the best and the wisest course under heaven to preserve his good name in the world and to maintain the peace of his conscience, who is most studious and industrious to abstain from all appearances of evil (1Th 5:22).—*Thomas Brooks*

In these unconscionable days...most people make no conscience to sin against conscience; some have sinned so long against conscience that they have lost all conscience of sin.—*Edmund Calamy*

¹¹ **becloud...benight** – make obscure and involve in moral darkness.

¹² John Flavel, *The Whole Works of the Reverend John Flavel*, Vol. 4 (London; Edinburgh; Dublin: W. Baynes and Son; Waugh and Innes; M. Keene, 1820), 272.

THE NATURE OF CONSCIENCE

Richard Sibbes (1577-1635)

EVERY man feels and knows what conscience means. There are many rigid disputes of it among the schoolmen¹...They have much jangling² about the description of it, whether it be the soul itself, a faculty,³ or an act.

In a word, conscience is all these in some sort in diverse respects. Therefore, I will not wrangle with any particular opinion.

1. *For what is conscience but the soul itself reflecting upon itself?* It is the property of the reasonable soul and the excellence of it that it can return upon itself. The beast...cannot return upon itself and recoil.⁴ But the soul of the reasonable creature...knows himself and understands his own excellence. And wheresoever there is understanding, there is an act of reflection whereby the soul returns upon itself and knows what it doth. It knows what it wills; it knows what it affects...It is the property of the soul. Therefore, the original word in the Old Testament that signifies the heart is taken for the conscience.⁵ Conscience and heart are all one. I am persuaded in my soul, that is, in my conscience; and the Spirit witnesseth to our spirit, that is, to our conscience. Conscience is called the spirit, the heart, the soul because it is nothing but the soul reflecting and returning upon itself.

Therefore, it is called *conscience*, that is, one knowing joined with another because conscience knows itself, and it knows what it knows. It knows what the heart is. It not only knows itself, but it is a knowledge of the heart *with* God. It is called *conscience* because it knows *with* God; for what conscience knows, God knows, which is above conscience. It is a knowledge with God and a knowledge of a man's self. And so, it may be the soul itself endued with that excellent faculty of reflecting

¹ **schoolmen** – teachers of philosophy and theology in the Middle Ages, also known as scholastics. Examples include Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) and John Duns Scotus (c. 1265-1308).

² **jangling** – noisy quarrelling; controversial debating.

³ **faculty** – power of the mind.

⁴ **beast...cannot return recoil** – *return* = turn or direct one's mind towards something; *recoil* = draw back from an act; therefore, a beast cannot think upon what it is going to do, evaluate it, and then draw back from it.

⁵ “The original word in the Old Testament that signifies the heart, it is taken for the conscience.” Cf. Gesenius, *Thesaurus philologicus criticus linguae hebraeae et chaldaee Veteris Testamenti*, Vol. 1-3, 1835.

and returning upon itself. Therefore, it judgeth of its own acts because it can return upon itself.

2. Conscience likewise in some sort may be called a *faculty*. The common stream⁶ runs that it is a power. It is not one power, but conscience is in all the powers of the soul; for it is in the understanding, and there it rules. Conscience is that by which it is ruled and guided. Conscience is nothing but an application of it to some particular, to something it knows, to some rules it knows before. Conscience is in the will, in the affections, the joy of conscience, and the peace of conscience, and so it runs through the whole soul. It is not one faculty or two, but it is placed in all the faculties.

3. And some will needs have it *an act, a particular act, and not a power*. When it doth *exercise* conscience, it is an act. When it accuseth, excuseth, or when it witnesseth, it is an act. At that time, it is a faculty in act. So that we need not to wrangle whether it be this or that. Let us comprehend as much in our notions as we can: it is the soul, the heart, the spirit of a man returning upon itself; it hath something to do in all the powers; and it is an act itself when it is stirred up to accuse or to excuse; to punish a man with fears and terrors, or to comfort him with joy and the like.

Now conscience is a most excellent thing—it is above reason and sense, for conscience is under God and hath an eye to God always. Therefore, an atheist can have no conscience because he takes away the ground of conscience, which is an eye to God. Conscience looks to God. It is placed as God's deputy and vicegerent⁷ in man. Now it is above reason in this respect. Reason saith [that] you ought to do this: it is a comely thing, it is a thing acceptable with men amongst whom you live and converse, it becomes your condition as you are a man to carry yourself thus, it agrees with the rules and principles of nature in you. Thus saith reason, and they are good motives from reason. But conscience goeth higher. There is a God to Whom I must answer; there is a judgment—therefore I do this, and therefore I do not this. It is a more divine, a more excellent power in man than anything else—than sense or reason or whatsoever. As God planted it for special use, so it looks to God in all.

Therefore, the name for conscience in the Greek and Latin signifies “a knowledge with another” because it is a knowledge *with* God. “God

⁶ **common stream** – consensus of thinking about the conscience.

⁷ **vicegerent** – person appointed by a ruler to exercise his authority.

and my own heart know this. God and my conscience,”⁸ as we use to say.

There are three things joined with conscience.

1. It is a knowledge with a rule—a general rule. That is always the foundation of conscience in a man. For there is a general rule: whosoever commits murder, whosoever commits adultery, whosoever is a blasphemer, a swearer, a covetous, corrupt person, “shall not inherit the kingdom of God,” as the apostle saith (1Co 6:9). Here is the general rule. Now conscience applies it: “But I *am* such a one, therefore I shall not enter heaven.” So, here the conscience practiseth with a rule. It is a knowledge of those particulars with a general rule. And then,

2. It is a knowledge of me—of my own heart. I know what I have done, I know what I do, and in what manner, whether in hypocrisy or sincerity; I know what I think. And then,

3. It is a knowledge with God. For God knows what conscience knows. He knows what is thought or done. Conscience is above me, and God is above conscience. Conscience is above me and above all men in the world, for it is immediately subjugated⁹ to God. Conscience knows more than the world, and God knows a thousand times more than conscience or the world. It is a knowledge with a general rule; for where there is no general rule, there is no conscience. To make this a little clearer, all have a rule. Those that have not the Word, which is the best rule of all, yet they have the Word written in their hearts. They have a natural judicature¹⁰ in their souls: “Their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another” (Rom 2:15). They have a general rule: “You must do no wrong; you must do that which is right.”

In the soul, there is a treasure of rules by nature. The Word doth add more rules—the *law* and the *gospel*. And that part of the soul that preserves rules is called *intellectual* because it preserves rules. All men by nature have these graven in the soul. Therefore, the heathen were exact in the rules of justice, in the principles that they had by nature grafted and planted in them.

Now because the copy of the image of God—the law of God written in nature—was much blurred since the Fall, God gave a new copy of His law, which was more exact. Therefore, the Jews, which had the

⁸ The name for conscience in the Greek and Latin signifies “a knowledge with another.” That is συνέιδησις = a knowing with oneself, consciousness; and *conscientia* (*con-scio*) = joint knowledge.

⁹ **immediately subjugated** – directly in submission.

¹⁰ **judicature** – court of justice.

Word of God, should have had more conscience than the heathen because they had a better general rule. And now, having the gospel too, which is a more evangelical rule, we should be more exact in our lives than they.

But every man in the world hath a rule. If men sin without the law, they shall be judged without the law (Rom 2:12) by the principles of nature. If they sin under the gospel, they shall be judged by the Word and gospel. So, conscience is a knowledge with a rule, [a knowledge of] the particular actions that I have done, and a knowledge with God.

In a word, to clear this further concerning the nature of conscience, know that God hath set up a court in man; and there is in man all that are in a court.

1. **There is a *register*¹¹ to take notice of what we have done.** Besides the general rule, for that is the ground and foundation of all, there is conscience, which is a register to set down whatsoever we have done exactly. The conscience keeps diaries. It sets down everything. It is not forgotten, though we think it is, when conscience is once awaked. As in Jeremiah 17:1, “The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond” upon their souls. All their wit and craft will not rase¹² it out. It may be forgotten a while by the rage of lusts or one thing or other, but there is a register that writes it down. Conscience is the register.

2. **And then there are *witnesses*:** the testimony of conscience. Conscience doth witness, “This I have done, this I have not done.”

3. **There is an *accuser with the witness*.** The conscience accuseth or excuseth.

4. **Then there is the *judge*.** Conscience is the judge. There it doth judge, “This is well done, this is ill¹³ done.”

5. **Then there is an *executioner*.** Conscience is that too. Upon accusation and judgment, there is punishment. The first punishment is always within a man before he goes to hell. The punishment of conscience is a pre-judgment of future judgment. There is a flash of hell presently after an ill act. The heathen could observe that God hath framed the heart and the brain so that there is a sympathy between them. Whatsoever is in the understanding that is well and comfortable, the understanding in the brain sends it to the heart and raiseth some

¹¹ **register** – officer or person whose business is to write accounts of transactions in a book, particularly of the acts and proceedings of courts or other public bodies.

¹² **rase** – scratch out; erase.

¹³ **ill** – wickedly.

comfort. If the understanding apprehends dolorous¹⁴ things, ill matters, then the heart smites, as “David’s heart smote him” (1Sa 24:5). The heart smites with grief for the present and with fear for the time to come.

In good things, a good excusing conscience brings joy presently and hope for the time to come.

God hath set and planted in man this court of conscience; and it is God’s hall, wherein He keeps His first judgment, wherein He keeps His assizes.¹⁵ And conscience doth all the parts. It registereth, it witnesseth, it accuseth, it judgeth, it executes—it doth all.

Besides His love to us to keep us from sin, and then by smiting us to drive us to conversion and repentance to turn from our sins to God, one main end among the rest is to be a pre-judgment, which makes way to God’s eternal judgment; for therein things are judged before. When God lays open the book of conscience, when it is written there by this register, we shall have much to do to excuse ourselves or to plead that we need many witnesses; for our conscience *will* accuse us. We shall be self-accusers and self-condemners as the apostle saith. Conscience will take God’s part, and God will take part with conscience. And God hath planted it for this main end that He might be justified in the damnation of wicked men at the Day of Judgment.¹⁶

Now you see, in general, what the nature of conscience is and why it is planted in us by God.

From *The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, Vol. 3 (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; W. Robertson, 1862), 208-212, in the public domain.

Richard Sibbes (1577-1635): early Puritan preacher at Cambridge and later Gray’s Inn, London; born at Tostock, Suffolk, England, UK.



There are four sorts of consciences: some bad and unquiet, some bad and quiet, some good and unquiet, some good and quiet. For a conscience to be bad and quiet is the worst temper that can be! It is better to have a bad unquiet than a bad and quiet conscience; better to have a tormenting [hell] in the soul than a fool’s paradise. The best frame of conscience is the good and quiet conscience. This is a paradise upon earth...a mansion for the Trinity to dwell in.

—*Edmund Calamy*

¹⁴ **dolorous** – distressful; painful.

¹⁵ **assizes** – sessions of a court.

¹⁶ See FGB 210, *Day of Judgment*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

THE DUTIES OF CONSCIENCE

William Perkins (1558-1602)

THE proper actions or duties of conscience are twofold: to give testimony or to give judgment (Rom 2:15).

To Give Testimony: Conscience gives testimony by determining that a thing was done or not done. “Their conscience also bearing witness” (Rom 2:15). “Our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience” (2Co 1:12).

Here we must consider three things: (1) of what things conscience bears witness; (2) in what manner; [and] (3) how long.

Point 1: Conscience bears witness of our thoughts, our affections, [and] our outward actions. That it bears witness of our secret thoughts appears by the solemn protestation that at some time men use: “In my conscience, I never thought it.” Whereby they signify that they think something, or they think it not, and that their consciences can tell what they think. Neither must this seem strange. For there are two actions of the understanding: the one is simple, which barely conceives or thinks this or that; [and] the other is a reflecting or doubling of the former, whereby a man conceives and thinks with himself what he thinks. And this action properly pertains to the conscience. The mind thinks a thought, then conscience goes beyond the mind and knows what the mind thinks; so, if a man would go about to hide his sinful thoughts from God, his conscience, as another person within him, shall reveal all. By means of this second action, conscience may bear witness even of thoughts; and from hence also it seems to borrow its name because conscience is a *science* (or knowledge) joined with another knowledge, for by it I conceive and know what I know.

Again, conscience bears witness what the wills and affections of men are in every matter. “I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren” (Rom 9:1-3).

Lastly, it witnesses what men’s actions are. “Oftentimes also thine own heart knoweth [that is, conscience witnesses] that thou...likewise hast cursed others” (Ecc 7:22).

Point 2: The manner that conscience uses in giving testimony stands in two things. First, it observes and takes notice of all things that we

do. Second, it does inwardly and secretly within the heart tell us of them all. In this respect, it may fitly be compared to a notary¹ (or a register) who always has the pen in his hand to note and record whatsoever is said or done, who also, because he keeps the rolls and records of the court, can tell what has been said and done many hundreds [of] years past.

Point 3: How long conscience bears witness. It does continually—not for a minute, a day, a month, or a year, but *forever*. When a man dies, conscience dies not. When the body is rotting in the grave, conscience lives and is safe and sound. And when we shall rise again, conscience shall come with us to the bar of God’s judgment, either to accuse or excuse us before God. “Their conscience...bearing witness...in the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ” (Rom 2:15-16).

By this first duty of conscience, we are to learn three things. The first [is] that there is a God. And we may be led to the sight of this even by very reason. For conscience bears witness of what? Of your particular doings. But against whom or with whom does it give testimony? You may feel in your heart that it does it either *for* you or *against* you. And to whom is it a witness? To men or angels? That cannot be, for they cannot hear the voice of conscience. They cannot receive conscience’s testimony. Nay, they cannot see what is in the heart of man! It remains, therefore, that there is a spiritual substance,² most wise, most holy, most mighty, Who sees all things, to Whom conscience bears record, and that is God Himself. Let atheists bark against this as long as they will. They have that in them that will convince them of the truth of the Godhead, will they, nill³ they, either in life or death.

Second, we learn that God does watch over all men by a special providence. The master of a prison is known by this to have care over his prisoners: if he sends keepers with them to watch them and to bring them home again in convenient time. And so, God’s care to man is manifest in this: that when He created man and placed him in the world, He gave him conscience to be his keeper, to follow him always at his heels, to dog him (as we say), to pry into his actions, and to bear witness of them all.

Third, hence we may observe God’s goodness and love to man. If he does anything amiss, God sets his conscience first to tell him of it

¹ **notary** – secretary.

² **substance** – divine essence of God, of which the three Persons of the Trinity are one.

³ **nill** – not will.

secretly. If then he amends, God forgives it. If not, then afterward, conscience must openly accuse him for it at the bar of God's judgment before all the saints and angels in heaven.

To Give Judgment: The second work of conscience is to give judgment of things done. "To give judgment" means to determine that a thing is well done or ill done. Herein conscience is like to a judge who holds an assize, takes notice of indictments, and causes the most notorious criminal that is to hold up his hand at the bar of his judgment. Nay, it is (as it were) a little god sitting in the middle of men's hearts, arraigning⁴ them in this life as they shall be arraigned for their offences at the tribunal seat of the ever-living God in the Day of Judgment. Wherefore, the temporary judgment that is given by the conscience is nothing else but a beginning (or a forerunner) of the last judgment.

Hence, we are admonished to take special heed that nothing past lies heavy upon us and that we charge not our conscience in the time to come with any matter. For if our conscience accuses us, God will much more condemn us, says Saint John, because He sees all our actions more clearly and judges them more severely than conscience can (1Jo 3:20). It shall be good, therefore, for all men to labor that they may say with Paul, "I know nothing by myself" (1Co 4:4), so that they may stand before God without blame forever.

Here we must consider two things: first, the cause that makes conscience give judgment; [and], second, the manner how.

1. The Cause of Judgment: The cause is the *binder* of the conscience. The binder is [whatever] has power and authority over conscience to order it. To *bind* is to urge, cause, and constrain it in every action, either to accuse for sin or excuse for well doing, or to say this may be done or it may not be done...When once the binding power is set over the conscience, then in every action it must necessarily either accuse or excuse. Even as a man in a city or town, having his liberty, may go up and down or not go where and when he will; but if his body is attached by the magistrate and imprisoned, then his former liberty is restrained, and he can [only] go up and down within the prison or some other allowed place.

The binder of conscience is either proper or improper.

1. Proper: Proper⁵ is the thing that has absolute and sovereign power to bind the conscience. And that is the Word of God written in the

⁴ **arraigning** – calling before a court to answer charges made against them.

⁵ **EDITOR'S NOTE:** Under *proper*, the author gives an extended discussion of God's Law and the gospel. Under *improper*, he gives a further extended discussion of human laws, vows,

books of the Old and New Testaments. *Reasons*: (1) He Who is the Lord of conscience by His Word and laws binds conscience. But God is the only Lord of conscience because He created it, He alone governs it, and none but He knows it. Therefore, His Word and laws only bind conscience properly. (2) He Who has power to save or destroy the soul for the keeping or breaking of His laws has absolute power to bind the soul and conscience by the same laws. But the first is true of God alone. “There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy” (Jam 4:12). “The LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; he will save us” (Isa 33:22). Therefore, the Word of God alone, by an absolute and sovereign power, binds conscience. Because this point is clear of itself, further proof is needless.

Hence, we are taught sundry⁶ points of instruction. (1) Such as are ignorant among us must labor to get knowledge of God’s Word because it binds conscience. Neither will the plea of ignorance serve for excuse because, whether we know God’s laws or know them not, they still bind us. And we are bound not only to do them, but when we know them not, we are further bound not to be ignorant of them but to seek to know them. If we had no more sins, our ignorance would be sufficient to condemn us. (2) God’s Word is to be obeyed though we should offend all men, yes, lose all men’s favor and suffer the greatest damage that may be—even the loss of our lives. And the reason is at hand because God’s Word has this prerogative⁷ to bridle, bind, and restrain the conscience. (3) Whatsoever we enterprise or take in hand, we must first search whether God gives us liberty in conscience and warrant to do it. For if we do otherwise, conscience is bound presently to charge us of sin before God. (4) We do here see how dangerous the case is of all timeservers⁸ who will live as they desire and be of no certain religion until differences and dissensions therein are ended, and they have the determination of a general council. For whether these things happen or not, it is certain that they are bound in conscience to receive and believe the ancient, prophetic, and apostolic doctrine touching the true worship of God and the way to everlasting life, which is the true religion. The same is to be said of all drowsy Protestants and lukewarm gospellers who use religion, not with that care and conscience they

and promises. These discussions are too lengthy to be included in this article; we therefore refer the reader to Vol. 8 of Perkins’ *Works*, pp. 14-55; available from Reformation Heritage Books, www.heritagebooks.org.

⁶ **sundry** – various.

⁷ **prerogative** – exclusive privilege or right.

⁸ **timeservers** – those who conform to current ways and opinions for personal advantage.

ought, but only then and so far forth as it serves for their turns,⁹ commonly neglecting or despising the assemblies where the Word is preached and seldom frequenting the Lord's Table...Like silly wretches they neither see nor feel the constraining power that God's Word has in their consciences.

God's Word is either law or gospel.

2. Improper: The improper binder is that which has no power or virtue to bind conscience but does it only by virtue of God's Word or of some part of it. It is threefold: human laws, an oath, [and] a promise.

From *The Works of William Perkins*, ed. J. Stephen Yuille, Joel R. Beeke, and Derek W. H. Thomas, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 10-14; used by permission.

William Perkins (1558-1602): Influential English Puritan preacher and theologian; born in Marston Jabbett, Bulkington, Warwickshire, England, UK.



The seared conscience: Such is theirs who have given their names to Christ, but lift their heel against Him, of which the apostle speaks, "Having their conscience seared with a hot iron" (1Ti 4:2), that is, having a corrupt and putrefied conscience that has the devil's brand-mark upon it. Plainly, a seared conscience is a rotten, venomous, ulcerated, pestilent, filthy, gangrenated conscience. It doth not perform any of its offices but is even past feeling. [It might have been] in Christ's hospital under cure of soul distempers; but through indulging of sin and not being able to endure the sharp convictions, bitter reproofs, and close exhortations of the Word, he deadens his conscience unto an insensible senselessness (Jer 44:16-19). To this rank of profligate sinners, I refer all those that frequent ordinances, as well as those that reject them; that make a profession of religion, as well as those that hate the profession, yet have a reserve of sin with which they will not part. Searing (you know) is of the part that needs cure...For cure: Seriously set yourselves against those peculiar ways of sinning that have brought you to this. You know them. There is not anyone that hath a seared conscience, but he doth or may easily know how it came so. It is but one or two sorts of sins that are eminently mischievous to your souls in this case. Though a seared conscience is worse than a sleepy conscience, yet as it is more easily discernible, so it is but reasonable you should more speedily and vigorously set upon the cure! Take heed of accounting any sin small, lest at last you account not any sin great. Sirs, God hath been your Physician and hath used a variety of remedies. If nothing will prevail, and you industriously singe your consciences to make them senseless, as sure as God is true, He will make you sensible of your sin by everlasting burnings.—*Samuel Annesley*

If my conscience bears witness with me that I am a partaker of the precious grace of salvation, then happy am I!—*Charles Spurgeon*

⁹ turns – purposes.

EVERYONE HAS A CONSCIENCE

William Fenner (1600-1640)

Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.—Romans 2:15

FOUR propositions are contained in that portion of Scripture that I have chosen to make the subject of this ensuing treatise. 1. That there is in every man a conscience: “Their conscience...bearing [them] witness.” Every one of them had a conscience bearing them witness. 2. That the light, which conscience is directed to work by, is knowledge: “written in their hearts.” 3. That the bond that bindeth a man’s conscience is God’s law: “which shew the work of the law written in their hearts.” 4. That the office and duty of conscience is to bear witness either with ourselves or against ourselves, accusing or excusing ourselves or actions: “bearing witness, and their thoughts...accusing or else excusing one another.” I begin with the first.¹

Proposition I. There is in every man a conscience. There was a conscience in all these heathen in the text. There *is* in every man a conscience: “their conscience...bearing witness.” There was a conscience in the scribes and Pharisees: “being convicted by their own conscience” (Joh 8:9). There is a conscience in good men, as in Paul: “our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience” (2Co 1:12). There is a conscience in wicked men: “their mind and conscience is defiled” (Ti 1:15). As it is impossible the fire should be without heat, so it is impossible that any man should be without a conscience. Indeed, we use² to say, “Such an one hath no conscience,” but our meaning is that he hath no good conscience. But everyone hath a conscience, either good or bad. The Lord engraved conscience in man when He created him at first. True it is, since the Fall of man conscience is miserably corrupted; but man can never put it off. Conscience continueth forever in every man, whether he be in earth, heaven, or hell. The most base and devilish profanings³ in the world have a conscience. Let them choke it or smother it as much as they can, let them whore it or game it or drink it away as much as they are able for their hearts; yet conscience

¹ **Editor’s Note:** This article considers the first proposition only.

² **use** – are accustomed.

³ **profanings** – those given to profanity, that is, behavior or speech that is grossly irreverent.

will continue despite their teeth.

1. No length of time can wear this conscience out. What made Joseph's brethren to remember the cruel usage they showed him but conscience? It was about twenty years before, yet they could not wear it out.

2. No violence nor force can suppress conscience but that one day or other it will show itself. What made Judas go and carry back the money that he betrayed our Savior for and to cry out, "I have sinned" (Mat 27:4), but conscience? No question but he labored to suppress it, but he could not.

3. No greatness nor power can stifle conscience but that it will one day like a bandog⁴ fly in a sinner's face. What made Pharaoh cry out, "I and my people are wicked" (Exo 9:27), but conscience? He was a great king, and yet he was not able to overpower conscience.

4. No music, mirth, or jovializing⁵ can charm conscience, but it will play the devil to a wretched soul for all that. What was the evil spirit of melancholy that came upon Saul but conscience? He thought to allay it with instruments of music, but it still came again.

5. Death itself is not able to part conscience from a sinner. What is that worm that shall never die but only conscience? And in hell, conscience is as that fire that never goeth out.

I confess some seem to have quite⁶ lost conscience. They can omit good duties as though they had no conscience at all. They can defer repentance and turning to God as though they had no more conscience than a beast; but one day, conscience will appear and show plainly that it was present with them every moment of their lives, privy to all their thoughts and all their ways, and set before them all the things that they have done. Be men never so secure and senseless and seared for the present, conscience will break out either first or last.⁷ Either here or in hell, it will appear to every man that he hath and ever had a conscience.

Now the reasons why the Lord did plant a conscience in every man living are [as follows]:

1. Because the Lord is a very righteous Judge. And as He commandeth earthly judges not to judge without witness, so He Himself will not judge without witness; therefore, He planteth a conscience in everyone to bring in evidence for him or against him at God's tribunal.

⁴ **bandog** – dog tied or chained up, either to guard a house or on account of its ferocity.

⁵ **jovializing** – merry-making.

⁶ **quite** – completely.

⁷ **first or last** – sooner or later.

2. Because the Lord is very merciful. We are wondrous⁸ forgetful and mindless of God and of our own souls. [We] have need to be quickened up to our duties; therefore, the Lord hath given every one of us a conscience to be a continual monitor. Sometimes we forget to pray, and then conscience putteth us in mind to go to God. Sometimes we are dull in the duty, and conscience is as a prick⁹ to quicken us. Sometimes our passions are distempered,¹⁰ and then conscience checketh¹¹ and commandeth us to bridle them. We should never be kept in any order if it were not for conscience. Therefore, hath the Lord in mercy given us a conscience.

Use 1. The first use is to condemn that diabolical proverb common among men: “Conscience is hanged a great while ago.” No, no! Ahithophel may hang himself, but he cannot hang his conscience. Saul may kill himself, but conscience cannot be killed. It is a worm that never dieth (Mar 9:44). As the reasonable soul of man is immortal, so conscience also is immortal.

Use 2. Secondly, this condemneth such as go about to suppress conscience. Their conscience maketh them melancholic and lumpish¹² now and then, and they go about to shake it off. Alas! Why do ye go about that which is utterly impossible? Ye may suppress it for a while and gag it for a while, but ye can *never* shake it off. Conscience sticketh so close that a man may as soon shake off himself as his conscience. And indeed, his conscience is himself. “Let a man examine himself” (1Co 11:28), that is, his conscience. “Judge in yourselves” (1Co 11:13), that is, judge in your consciences.

Use 3. Thirdly, this confuteth¹³ that drunken opinion that conscience is nothing but a present fit of melancholy. No, it causeth, it may be, the present melancholic fit, but it is not it. Conscience is a standing power in a man that is evermore with him and will evermore judge him and condemn him if he be guilty before God. It will be with him when his dumpish¹⁴ fit is over. Let him laugh and be merry; yet conscience lies at the bottom of all and will spoil all the mirth (Pro 14:13). Let the drunkard be never so jovial; [yet] I will not believe but conscience amid that drunken mirth causeth some sadness within and telleth him this

⁸ **wondrous** – surprisingly; strangely.

⁹ **prick** – sharp pain caused by being pierced with a fine point; feeling of distress.

¹⁰ **distempered** – disturbed; troubled.

¹¹ **checketh** – stops sharply and suddenly.

¹² **melancholic and lumpish** – sad and depressed.

¹³ **confuteth** – disproves.

¹⁴ **dumpish** – depressed in spirit.

is a very wicked life. Let the carnal hypocrite daub up¹⁵ the matter with good duties and good prayers and good hopes; [yet] I cannot believe but there is a conscience lying at the bottom and telling him he is rotten for all this. You may see this in Cain (Gen 4:5). He had been at a good duty, sacrificing to the Lord; but his countenance fell when he had done. Conscience did lie at the bottom and did tell him God did not accept him. Conscience is with evil men at church—at sermon, at sacrament—and telleth them secretly that they are not the persons to whom the blessing of these ordinances belongs.

Use 4. Lastly, this may be for exhortation to the godly that they would consider this: that they have ever a conscience within them; and that therefore they would labor always to keep it “void of offence,” which was Paul’s exercise (Act 24:16). Take heed [that] you offend not your consciences in duties of piety towards God: in your praying, hearing, etc., no, nor in your calling, eating, drinking, liberties, recreation. Look always that you offend not your consciences because they are ever with you. When two live ever together, they had need not offend one another, else there will be no quiet. You and your consciences must ever live together. If ye offend them, ye are like to have very ill lives. Better live with a curst scold¹⁶ than live with an offended conscience. Ye had better offend the whole world then offend conscience. There are none whom ye are always to live with; but conscience ye are always to live with. Ye are not always to live with your husbands, nor always with your wives, nor always with your parents or masters. There is a time when you must part, but conscience and you will never part. Therefore, labor to keep it void of offence. And thus much of the first proposition: There is in every man a conscience.

From *The Soul’s Looking-glass, with a Treatise of Conscience* (Cambridge: Roger Daniel Printer, 1640); in the public domain.

William Fenner (1600-1640): English nonconformist Puritan pastor; died in Rochford, Essex, England, UK.



Conscience is God’s preacher in our bosoms, and it is a most certain rule that the man who will not regard the preacher in his bosom will never regard the preacher in the pulpit. And the reason why the preacher in the pulpit doeth no more good is because the preacher in the bosom is so much despised and neglected.

—*Edmund Calamy*

¹⁵ **daub up** – cover over.

¹⁶ **curst scold** – woman who persistently nags, finds fault, or criticizes.

A CORRUPTED CONSCIENCE

Arthur W. Pink (1886-1952)

IF there is one faculty of man's soul that might be thought to have retained the original image of God on it, it is surely the conscience. Such a view has indeed been widely held. Not a few of the most renowned philosophers and moralists have contended that conscience is nothing less than the divine voice itself speaking in the innermost part of our being. Without minimizing the great importance and value of this internal monitor, either in its office or in its operations, it must be emphatically declared that such theorists err, that even this faculty has not escaped from the common ruin of our entire beings. This is evident from the plain teaching of God's Word. Scripture speaks of a "weak conscience" (1Co 8:12), of men "having their conscience seared with a hot iron" (1Ti 4:2). It says that their "conscience is defiled" (Ti 1:15), that they have "an evil conscience" (Heb 10:22). Let us examine the point more closely.

Those who affirm that there is something essentially good in the natural man insist that his conscience is an enemy to evil and a friend to holiness. They stress the fact that the conscience produces an inward conviction against wrongdoing, a conflict in the heart over sin, a reluctance to commit it. They call attention to Pharaoh's acknowledgment of sin (Exo 10:16) and to Darius' being "sore displeased with himself" for his unjust act in condemning Daniel to be thrown into the lions' den (Dan 6:14). Some have even gone as far as to affirm that the opposition to greater and grosser crimes—which is found at first in all men—differs little or not at all from that conflict between the flesh and the spirit described in Romans 7:21-23. But such sophistry¹ is easily refuted. In the first place, while it is true that fallen man possesses a general notion of right and wrong and is able in some instances to distinguish between good and evil, while he remains unregenerate that moral instinct never causes him to truly delight in the former or to really abhor the latter. In whatever measure he may approve of good or disapprove of evil, it is from no consideration for God.

Conscience is only able to work according to the light it has. And since the natural man cannot discern spiritual things (1Co 2:14), it is useless in respect to them. How feeble is its light! It is more like the

¹ **sophistry** – method of argument that seems plausible but is invalid and misleading.

glimmer of a candle than the rays of the sun—merely sufficient to make the darkness visible. Owing to the darkened condition of the understanding, the conscience is fearfully ignorant. When it does discover that which is adverse, it indicates it feebly and ineffectually. Instead of directing the senses, it mostly confuses. How true this is in the case of the uncivilized. Conscience gives them a sense of guilt and then puts them to practicing the most abominable and often inhuman rites. It has induced them to invent and propagate² the most impious³ misrepresentations of deity. As a salve to their conscience, they often make the very objects of their worship the precedents and patrons⁴ of their favorite vices. The fact is that conscience is so sadly defective that it is unable to perform its duty until God enlightens, awakens, and renews it.

Its operations are equally faulty. Not only is conscience defective in vision, but its voice is very weak. How strongly it ought to upbraid⁵ us for our shocking ingratitude to our great Benefactor! How loudly it should remonstrate⁶ against the stupid neglect of our spiritual interests and eternal welfare. Yet it does neither the one nor the other. Though it offers some checks on outward and gross sins, it makes no resistance to the subtler secret workings of indwelling corruption. If it prompts to the performance of duty, it ignores the most important and spiritual part of that duty. It may be uneasy if we fail to spend the usual amount of time each day in private prayer, but it is little concerned about our reverence, humility, faith, and fervor in prayer. Those in Malachi's day were guilty of offering God defective sacrifices, yet conscience never troubled them about it (Mal 1:7-8). Conscience may be scrupulous⁷ in carrying out the precepts of men or our personal inclinations yet utterly neglect those things that the Lord has commanded, like the Pharisees who would not eat food while their hands remained ceremonially unwashed yet disregarded what God had commanded (Mar 7:6-9).

Conscience is woefully partial. [It disregards] favorite sins and excuses those that most besiege us. All such attempts to excuse our faults are founded on ignorance of God, of ourselves, of our duty. Otherwise, conscience would bring in the verdict of guilty. Conscience often joins with our lusts to encourage a wicked deed. Saul's conscience told him not to offer sacrifice until Samuel came, yet to please the people and

² **propagate** – spread from person to person.

³ **impious** – without reverence for God.

⁴ **precedents and patrons** – examples and supporters.

⁵ **upbraid** – rebuke; find fault with.

⁶ **remonstrate** – protest; raise an objection.

⁷ **scrupulous** – thorough and extremely attentive to details.

prevent them from deserting him, he did so. And when that servant of God reproved him, the king tried to justify his offense by saying that the Philistines were gathered together against Israel, and that he dared not attack them before calling on God: "I forced myself therefore, and offered a burnt offering" (1Sa 13:8-12). Conscience will strain to find some consideration with which to appease itself and approve of the evil act. Even when rebuking certain sins, it will find motives and discover inducements⁸ to them. Thus, when Herod was about to commit the murder of John the Baptist, which was against his convictions, his conscience came to his aid and urged him forward by impressing on him that he must not violate the oath that he had taken before others (Mar 6:26).

Conscience often ignores great sins while condoning lesser ones, as Saul was hard upon the Israelites for a breach of the ceremonial law (1Sa 14:33) but made no scruple of killing eighty-five of the Lord's priests. Conscience will even devise arguments that favor the most outrageous acts; thus, it is not only like a corrupt lawyer pleading an evil cause, but like a corrupt judge justifying the wicked. Those who clamored for the crucifixion of Christ did so under the pretext of its being orderly and necessary: "We have a law, and by our law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God" (Joh 19:7). Little wonder that the Lord says of men that they "call evil good, and good evil...put darkness for light, and light for darkness" (Isa 5:20). Conscience never moves the natural man to perform duties out of gratitude and thankfulness to God. It never convicts him of the heavy guilt of Adam's offense that is lying upon his soul, nor of lack of faith in Christ. It allows sinners to sleep in peace in their awful unbelief. But theirs is not a sound and solid peace, for there is no ground for it; rather it is the false security of ignorance. Says God of them, "They consider not in their hearts that I remember all their wickedness" (Hos 7:2).

The accusations of conscience are ineffectual. They produce no good fruit, yielding neither meekness, humility, nor genuine repentance, but rather a dread of God as a harsh Judge or hatred of Him as an inexorable⁹ enemy. Not only are its accusations ineffectual, but often they are quite erroneous. Because of the darkness upon the understanding, the moral perception of the natural man greatly errs. As Thomas Boston¹⁰ said of the corrupt conscience, "So it is often found like a blind and furious horse, which violently runs down himself, his

⁸ **inducements** – persuasions or influences to do something.

⁹ **inexorable** – rigidly severe and incapable of being persuaded to mercy.

¹⁰ Thomas Boston, *The Whole Works of Thomas Boston*, ed. Samuel M'Millan, Vol. 8 (Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1850), 82.

rider, and all that comes in his way.” A fearful example of that appears in our Lord’s prediction in John 16:2 that received repeated fulfillment in the Acts: “They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.” In like manner, Saul of Tarsus after his conversion acknowledged: “I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth” (Act 26:9). The unrenewed conscience is a most unreliable guide.

Even when the conscience of the unregenerate is awakened by the immediate hand of God and is struck with deep and painful conviction of sin, far from its moving the soul to seek the mercy of God through the Mediator,¹¹ it fills him with futility and dismay. As Job 6:4 declares, when the arrows of the Almighty strike a man, their poison drinks up his spirit as the terrors of God set themselves to war against him. Formerly this man may have gone to great pains to stifle the accusations of his inward judge, but now he cannot. Instead, conscience rages and roars, putting the whole man in dreadful consternation,¹² as he is terrified by a sense of the wrath of a holy God and the fiery indignation that shall devour His adversaries. This fills him with such horror and despair that, instead of turning to the Lord, he tries to flee from Him. Thus it was in the case of Judas who, when he was made to realize the awful gravity of his vile deed, went out and hanged himself. The Pharisees in John 8:9 demonstrated that the guilt of sin within the natural man causes him to turn *from* rather than *to* Christ. They, “convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one.”

The will is not the lord but the servant of the other faculties executing the strongest conviction of the mind or the most imperious¹³ command of our lusts; for there can be but one dominating influence in the will at one and the same time. Originally the excellence of man’s will consisted in following the guidance of right reason and submitting to the influence of proper authority. But in Eden, man’s will rejected the former and rebelled against the latter; and in consequence of the Fall,

¹¹ **Mediator** – literally: “one who goes between”; “It pleased God in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus His only begotten Son, according to the covenant made between them both, to be the Mediator between God and Man; the Prophet, Priest and King; Head and Savior of His church, the heir of all things, and judge of the world: Unto whom He did from all eternity give a people to be His seed, and to be by Him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified.” (*Second London Baptist Confession*, 8.1) See also Free Grace Broadcaster 183, *Christ the Mediator*; both available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

¹² **consternation** – amazement and terror that overcomes one’s faculties.

¹³ **imperious** – tyrannical.

his will has ever since been under the control of an understanding that prefers darkness to light and of affections that crave evil rather than good. Thus, the fleeting pleasures of sense and the puny interests of time excite our wishes, while the lasting delights of godliness and the riches of immortality receive little or no attention. The will of the natural man is biased by his corruption, for his inclinations gravitate in the opposite direction from his duty; therefore, he is in complete bondage to sin, impelled¹⁴ by his lusts. The unregenerate¹⁵ are not merely unwilling to seek after holiness; they inveterately¹⁶ hate it.

Since the will turned traitor to God and entered the service of Satan, it has been completely paralyzed toward good. Said the Savior, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him” (Joh 6:44). And why is it that man cannot come to Christ by his own natural powers? Because not only has he no inclination to do so, but the Savior repels him: His yoke is unwelcome, His scepter repulsive. In connection with the spiritual things, the condition of the will is like that of the woman in Luke 13:11 who “was bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself.” If such is the case, then how can man be said to act voluntarily? Because he freely chooses the evil: “the soul of the wicked desireth evil” (Pro 21:10), always carrying out that desire except when prevented by divine restraint. Man is the slave of his corruption like a wild colt; from earliest childhood, he is averse to restraint. The will of man is uniformly rebellious against God. When providence thwarts his desires, instead of bowing in humble resignation, he frets with disquietude¹⁷ and acts like a wild bull in a net. Only the Son can make him “free” (Joh 8:36), for there is “liberty” only where His Spirit is (2Co 3:17).

Here, then, are the ramifications¹⁸ of human depravity. The Fall has blinded man’s mind, hardened his heart, disordered his affections, corrupted his conscience, disabled his will, so that there is “no soundness” in him (Isa 1:6), “no good thing” in him (Rom 7:18).

From *Gleanings in the Scriptures: Man’s Total Depravity*, from *Studies in the Scriptures*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.



God and conscience note and observe everything.—*Richard Sibbes*

¹⁴ **impelled** – driven.

¹⁵ **unregenerate** – those who have not been born of God’s Spirit.

¹⁶ **inveterately** – by long, deep-rooted habit.

¹⁷ **disquietude** – anxiety or uneasiness that makes one tense and irritable.

¹⁸ **ramifications** – consequences of actions, especially when complex or unwelcome.

A SIN-BURDENED CONSCIENCE

John Flavel (c. 1630-1691)

*Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden,
and I will give you rest.—Matthew 11:28*

HERE is the encouragement Christ gives to this duty [of coming to Him:] “I will give you rest. I will refresh you. I will give you rest from your labor. Your consciences shall be pacified, your hearts at rest and quiet in that pardon, peace, and favor of God that I will procure for you by My death”...For let a man break his heart for sin, let him weep out his eyes, let him mourn as a dove and shed as many tears for sin (if it were possible) as ever there fell drops of rain upon the ground, yet if he come not to Christ by faith, his repentance shall not save him nor all his sorrows bring him to true rest. Hence note,

Some souls are heavy laden with the burdensome sense of sin. I do not say all are so, for “fools make a mock at sin” (Pro 14:9). It is so far from being burdensome to some that it is a sport to them (Pro 10:23). But when a man’s eyes are opened to see the evil that is in sin and the eternal misery that follows it (sin and hell being linked together with such strong chains as nothing but the blood of Christ can loose), then no burden is like that of sin: “A wounded spirit who can bear?” (Pro 18:14). For let us but consider the efficacy that the law of God hath upon the consciences of men when it comes in the spirituality and power of it to convince and humble the soul of a sinner. For then,

First, the memory of sin long since committed is refreshed and revived, as if it had been but yesterday. There are fresh recognitions of sin long since acted and forgotten, as if they had never been. What we did in our youth is fetched back again; and by a new impression of fear and horror, [they are] set home upon the trembling conscience. “Thou writest bitter things against me, and makest me to possess the iniquities of my youth” (Job 13:26). Conscience can call back the days that are past and draw up a new charge upon the score of old sins (Gen 42:21). All that ever we did is recorded and entered in the book of conscience; and now is the time to open that book, when the Lord will convince and awaken sinners. We read in Job 14:17 of sealing up iniquities in a bag, which is an allusion to the clerk of the assizes, who takes all the indictments that are made against persons at the *assizes* and seals

them up in a bag for a trial. This is the first office and work of conscience; upon which,

The second, namely its accusations, do depend. These accusations of conscience are terrible things. Who can stand before them? They are full, they are clear, and all of them referring to the approaching judgment of the great and terrible God.

Conscience dives into all sins, secret as well as open, and into all the circumstances and aggravations of sin, as being committed against light, against mercy, against the strivings, warnings, and regrets of conscience. [Thus] we may say of the efficacy of conscience, as it is said of the influence of the sun, “There is nothing hid from the heat thereof” (Psa 19:6). “Come,” saith the woman of Samaria, “see a man, which told me all things that ever I did” (Joh 4:29). Christ convinced her but of one sin by His discourse; but conscience, by that one, fetched in and charged all the rest upon her. And as the accusations of conscience are full, so they are clear and undeniable. A man becomes self-convinced; and there remains no shift, excuse, or plea to defend himself. A thousand witnesses cannot prove any point more clearly than one testimony of conscience doth. “And he was speechless” (Mat 22:12), a mute—muzzled (as the word signifies) by the clear testimony of his own conscience. These accusations are the second work of conscience, and they make way for the third, namely,

Thirdly, the sentence and condemnation of conscience. Truly this is an insupportable¹ burden. The condemnation of conscience is nothing else but its application of the condemning sentence of the law to a man’s person. The law curseth everyone that transgresseth it (Gal 3:10). Conscience applies this curse to the guilty sinner, so that it sentences the sinner in God’s name and authority, from whence there is no appeal. The voice of conscience is the voice of God; and what it pronounces in God’s name and authority, He will confirm and ratify: “If our heart [*i.e.*, our conscience] condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things” (1Jo 3:20). This is the torment that no man can endure. See the effects of it in Cain, in Judas, and in Spira;² it is a real foretaste of hell-torments! This is that worm that never dies

¹ **insupportable** – unbearable.

² **Francis Spira** or **Francesco Spiera** (1502-1548) – famous Protestant Italian lawyer; he died under dreadful agony of conscience because, fearing the Inquisition, he renounced the Protestant faith. He later died in terrifying despair. Charles Spurgeon said that the case of Spira was “the most dreadful case, perhaps, except that of Judas, which is upon record in the memory of man.” Some believe Spira was the model for Bunyan’s “Man in the Iron Cage” in the Interpreter’s house (*The Pilgrim’s Progress*). His story is told in Nathaniel Bacon’s *A Relation of the Fearful Estate of Francis Spira*, well-known to the Puritans.

(Mar 9:44). For look, as a worm in the body is bred of the corruption that is there, so the accusations and condemnations of conscience are bred in the soul by the corruption and guilt that are there. As the worm in the body preys and bites upon the tender, sensible, inward parts, so doth conscience touch the very quick. This is the third effect or work to sentence and condemn; and this also makes way for a fourth, namely,

Fourthly, to upbraid and reproach the sinner under his misery. This makes a man a very terror to himself. To be pitied in misery is some relief, but to be upbraided and reproached doubles our affliction. You know it was one of the aggravations of Christ's sufferings to be reproached by the tongues of His enemies while He hanged in torments upon the cursed tree; but all the scoffs and reproaches, the bitter jeers and sarcasms in the world, are nothing to those of a man's own conscience, which will cut to the very bone.

Oh! When a man's conscience shall say to him in a day of trouble, as Reuben to his afflicted brethren, "Spake I not unto you, saying, Do not sin against the child; and ye would not hear? Therefore, behold, also his blood is required" (Gen 42:22). So conscience: "Did I not warn you, threaten you, persuade you in time against these evils? But you would not hearken to me; therefore, behold now you must suffer to all eternity for it. The wrath of God is kindled against thy soul for it. This is the fruit of thy own willful madness and obstinacy. Now thou shalt know the price of sinning against God, against light and conscience!" Oh, this is terrible! Every bite of conscience makes a poor soul to startle, and in a terrible fright to cry, "Oh, the worm! Oh, the bitter foretaste of hell! A wounded spirit who can bear?" This is a fourth wound of conscience, and it makes way for a fifth; for here it is as the pouring out of the vials and the sounding of those woe-trumpets in Revelation: "one woe is past," and another cometh (Rev 9:12). After all these deadly blows of conscience upon the very heart of a sinner comes another as dreadful as any that is yet named; and that is,

Fifthly, the fearful expectation of wrath to come, which it begets in the soul of a guilty sinner. Of this you read, "A certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation" (Heb 10:27). And this makes the stoutest sinner faint and sink under the burden of sin. For the tongue of man cannot declare what it is to lie down and rise with those fearful expectations. The case of such sinners is somewhat like that which is described in Deuteronomy 28:65-67: "The LORD shall give thee there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind: And thy life shall hang in doubt before thee; and thou shalt fear day and night, and shalt have none assurance of thy life: In the morning

thou shalt say, Would God it were even! and at even thou shalt say, Would God it were morning! for the fear of thine heart wherewith thou shalt fear, and for the sight of thine eyes which thou shalt see.” It differs only in this: in this scripture, you have the terror of those described, whose temporal life hangs in doubtful suspense; but in the persons I am speaking of, it is a trembling under the apprehensions and expectations of *the vengeance of eternal fire*.

Believe it, friends, words cannot express what those poor creatures feel that lie down and rise up under these fears and frights of conscience. “Lord, what will become of me! I am free among the dead, yes, among the damned. I hang by the frail thread of a momentary life, which will and must break shortly; and [it] may break the next moment over the everlasting burnings.” No pleasant bread is to be eaten in these days, but what is like the bread of condemned men.

Thus, you see what the burden of sin is when God makes it to bear upon the consciences of men. No burden of affliction is like it! Losses of dearest relations, sorrows for an only son, are not so pungent and penetrating as these. For,

No creature-enjoyment is pleasant under these inward troubles. In other troubles, they may signify something to a man’s relief; but here, they are nothing. The wound is too deep to be healed by anything but the blood of Jesus Christ! Conscience requires as much to satisfy it as God requires to satisfy Him. “When God is at peace with thee,” saith conscience, “then will I be at peace with thee too. But until then, expect no rest nor peace from me. All the pleasures and diversions in the world shall never stop my mouth! Go where thou wilt, I will follow thee like thy shadow. Be thy portion in the world as sweet as it will, I will drop in gall and wormwood into thy cup, so that thou shalt taste no sweetness in anything until thou hast got thy pardon!”

These inward troubles for sin alienate the mind from all former pleasures and delights. There is no more taste or savor in them than in the white of an egg. Music is out of tune. All instruments jar and groan. Ornaments have no beauty. What heart hath a poor creature to deck that body in which dwells such a miserable soul! [He has no heart] to feed and pamper that carcass that hath been the soul’s inducement to and instrument in sin and must be its companion in everlasting misery!...

If it be enquired in the last place, why God makes the burden of sin press so heavy upon the hearts of poor sinners? We answer,

First, He doth it to divorce their hearts from sin, by giving them an experimental taste of the bitterness and evil that is in sin. Men’s hearts

are naturally glued with delight to their sinful courses; all the persuasions and arguments in the world are too weak to separate them from their beloved lusts. The morsels of sin go down smoothly and sweetly; they roll them with much delectation³ under their tongues, and it is [necessary] that such bitter potions as these should be administered “to make their stomachs rise against sin.” [That is what the] word used by the apostle in 2 Corinthians 7:11 signifies: “Ye sorrowed after a godly sort.” It notes the rising of the stomach with rage, a being angry even unto sickness; and this is the way, the best and most effectual way, to separate the soul of a sinner from his lusts. For, in these troubles, conscience saith, as it is in Jeremiah 4:18: “Thy way and thy doings have procured these things unto thee; this is thy wickedness, because it is bitter, because it reacheth unto thine heart.”

Secondly, the Lord doth this to make Jesus Christ most welcome and desirable to the soul. Christ is not *sweet* until sin is made *bitter* to us. “They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick” (Mat 9:12). If once God wounds the heart of a sinner with the stinging sense of sin, then nothing in the world is so precious, so necessary, so vehemently desired and panted for as Jesus Christ! “Oh, that I had Christ, if I did go in rags, if I did feed upon no other food all my days, but the bread and water of affliction!” This is the language of a soul filled with the sense of the evil of sin.

Thirdly, the Lord doth this to advance the riches of His free grace in the eyes of sinners. Grace never appears grace until sin appears to be sin. The deeper our sense of the evil of sin is, the deeper our apprehensions of the free grace of God in Christ will be... Thus, you have had a brief account of what the burden of sin is, how souls are supported under that burden, and why the Lord causes sin to lie so heavy upon the souls of some sinners.

From *The Whole Works of the Reverend John Flavel*, Vol. 2 (London; Edinburgh; Dublin: W. Baynes & Son; Waugh & Innes; M. Keene, 1820), 158-162, 164-166; in the public domain.

John Flavel (c. 1630-1691): English Presbyterian and minister; born at Bromagrove, Worcester, England, UK.



My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe.

—Martin Luther

³ **delectation** – intense pleasure.

MINISTERS AND CONSCIENCES

William Fenner (1600-1640)

*Whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that he might know
your estate, and comfort your hearts.—Colossians 4:8*

OBSERVATION: Ministers are to enquire after the estate¹ of their people. Reason: It [morally needful for] everyone now to consider in what estate he standeth to his God.² This is a great question that we ministers ought to demand of our people to know their estates,

First, because we are shepherds and are bound to look well how it standeth with our flock. If we do not labor to know your estates, we can never look well to your souls. Consider that place in Proverbs: “Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks, and look well to thy herds” (Pro 27:23). [There,] the wise man first requireth that we should look well to our flocks, and then [he] directeth us in the manner how, viz.,³ by being diligent to know their estate [and] how it standeth with them.

Secondly, we are God’s laborers. We must know in what estate our work standeth, else we may labor and labor and all in vain! We may preach, exhort, and call upon our people to hear, believe, and obey; and all this may still be in vain if we do not enquire in what estate they are. This is the reason Paul could not forbear sending and enquiring how it stood with the Thessalonians (1Th 3:5)—what estate they were in, how it went with their faith, whether they kept it or no, lest the tempter had tempted them, and his labor should have been in vain. For so it had been for all his preaching and teaching them if they had not been in a good estate. Therefore, he sent to know.

Thirdly, we are to take the care and the charge of your souls. Now, then, how can we be quiet if we do not know in what estate your souls be? A good father cannot be at quiet if he does not know how it is with his children. What if they should be sick? What if undone? Oh, it would comfort a good father to know his children to be in good case. But if it were otherwise with them, though it would grieve him much, yet he had rather know it than not. For if he knows it, he can better tell what

¹ **estate** – spiritual condition.

² **what estate...God** – what his spiritual condition is before God.

³ **viz.** – Latin = *videlicet*: that is to say; namely.

to do. So it was with the apostle; his very heart yearned upon the Philippians. “O my poor people,” thought he, “I wonder what estate they are in. What if they totter⁴? What if they miscarry⁵? What if the devil has tempted them to sin and to apostatize? What if they are in trouble of conscience?” He could never be at peace until he knew their estate. “I trust in the Lord Jesus,” saith he, “to send Timotheus shortly unto you, that I also may be of good comfort, when I know your state” (Phi 2:19). He had a great care of their souls; and therefore, it would comfort his heart to know what estate they were in.

Fourthly, we are teachers, and therefore we must know the estate of our people. Otherwise, we are ignorant what doctrine to provide for them, what points to handle among them. Paul, in this epistle to the Colossians, knowing only their estate in general, delivereth abundance of general precepts and exhortations unto them. He describeth unto them the mystery of Christ, admonisheth them to continue steadfast therein to embrace the preaching of the Word, to beware of philosophy and the vain traditions and deceitful arguments of men, to take heed of excessive fondness upon ceremonies that were all ended in Christ, to set their affections on heaven, to mortify the deeds of the flesh, to put off the old man! He warneth them to be loving and humble. He biddeth wives to do their duties to their husbands, and husbands to love their wives, children to obey their parents, and parents to encourage their children. [He biddeth] servants to obey their masters, and masters to deal well with their servants, and all to continue in prayer, watchfulness, thanksgiving. [He biddeth them] to walk wisely towards them that are without, to be careful of godly and holy communication. Thus, knowing their estate only for the general, he teacheth them in general, and therefore now he concludeth, as if he should say, “I speak somewhat generally because I do not know your estates in particular; therefore, I send to you Tychicus, a faithful, good minister, that he may learn your estates and deal with you answerably. It may be that some of you lack corrosives;⁶ it may be that some of you lack cordials;⁷ it may be that some have need to be searched and humbled or encouraged and comforted. I have sent him to enquire into your estates that he may do accordingly.” “Whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that he might know your estate, and comfort your hearts” (Col 4:8).

The use of this is threefold:

⁴ **totter** – rock or shake as if about to collapse (spiritually).

⁵ **miscarry** – fail in one’s purpose (spiritually).

⁶ **corrosives** – medical remedies that eat away by chemical action.

⁷ **cordials** – medicines or tonics that excite the heart.

1. First, for instruction. Hence, we may see that a minister doeth but his duty when he enquireth into men's estates and how they stand before God. It is not prying into other men's matters. It is not being a busybody in other men's affairs. It is not a spirit of meddling. No! A minister doeth but his duty when he doeth it. How can a physician apply true and proper medical treatment unless he enquires into the state of men's bodies? (Jer 8:11). Now, a minister is a physician to men's souls; and therefore, he is to enquire of the state of men's souls and how they stand before God. They are men of Belial that say, "What? Must the minister know all?" and, "Can there be nothing done but the minister must hear of it?" These are very evil speeches. The minister doeth but his duty when he is inquisitive.

2. The second use may be for reproof. If it is the duty of a minister to enquire of men's estates before God, then those people who will not make known their estates are to blame. What is the reason that so many men abide in a rotten estate, except they are loath to open truly and fully what they are to God's ministers? No, many are like them in the prophet Isaiah who say to the seers, "See not" (Isa 30:10). They would not have God's ministers see what they do nor see what they are. I confess there are some that will open something about their estates, but not all they know by themselves. They keep in the main [things], like some foolish clients who misinform their counsel, making their case better than indeed it is, and so their cause miscarrieth. So, some keep in that which would give most light to judge their estates. But this ought not so to be. I can tell you an example of one that, being troubled about his estate before God, [said] with some ministers being by, "Oh," saith he, "I will tell you all that I know of myself. I will not hide a syllable from you. And if I am yet no better than a wretch, I beseech you tell me plainly that I am so! And if I am in Christ, I beseech you prove it plainly unto me!" This man took a right course, and thereby through God's mercy came in a little space to the assurance of his own blessed estate and condition.

3. Thirdly, for exhortation. Let God's ministers know of your estates that they may be able to speak to you accordingly. By this means, they may speak words in due season...If you had but a cut finger, would not you be glad to have the right plaster? And if you had a burning fever, would you not desire the right remedy? How much more in curing the sickness of the soul?

From *The Soul's Looking-glass with a Treatise of Conscience* (Cambridge: Roger Daniel Printer, 1640); in the public domain.



A DAMNED CONSCIENCE

John Flavel (c. 1630-1691)

THE spirit of man is a most tender, sensible, and apprehensive creature: the eye of the body is not so sensible of a touch, a nerve of the body is not so sensible when pricked, as the spirit of man is by the least touch of God's indignation upon it. "A wounded spirit who can bear?" (Pro 18:14). Other external wounds upon the body inflicted either by man or God are tolerable, but that which immediately touches the spirit of man is insufferable. Who can bear or endure it?

And as the spirit of man hath the most delicate and exquisite sense of misery, so it hath a vast capacity to receive and let in the fulness of anguish and misery into it. It is a large vessel, called a vessel of wrath "fitted to destruction" (Rom 9:22). The large capacity of the soul is seen in this: it is not in the power of all the creatures in the world to satisfy and fill it! It can drink up, as we say, all the rivers of created good, and its thirst is not quenched by such a draught;¹ but after all, it cries, "Give, give" (Pro 30:15). Nothing but an infinite God can quiet and satisfy its appetite and raging thirst.

And as it is capable and receptive of more good than is found in all creatures, so it is capable of more misery and anguish than all the creatures can inflict upon it. Let all the elements, all men on earth, yea, all the devils and damned in hell, conspire and unite in a design to torment man, yet when they have done all, his spirit is capable of a farther degree of torment—a torment as much beyond it as a rack² is beyond a hard bed or the sword in his bowels is beyond the scratch of a pin. The devils indeed are the executioners and tormentors of the damned; but if that were all they were capable to suffer, the torment of the damned would be comparatively mild and gentle to what they are. Oh, the largeness of the understanding of man—what will it not take into its vast capacity!

But add to this that the damned souls have all those affections laid in a deep and everlasting sleep, the exercises whereof would be *relieving* by emptying their souls of any part of their misery; and all those passions thoroughly and everlastingly awakened, which increase their

¹ **draught** – large mouthful of drink; act of drinking or swallowing.

² **rack** – instrument of torture consisting of a frame on which a victim was stretched by turning rollers to which the wrists and ankles were tied.

torments. The affections of joy, delight, and hope are benumbed³ in them and laid fast asleep, never to be awakened into act anymore. In Scripture, their hope is said to *perish*, i.e., it so perisheth that after death it shall never exert another act to all eternity. The activity of any of those affections would be like a cooling gale or refreshing spring amidst their torments...And as these affections are laid asleep, so their passions are roused and thoroughly awakened to torment them—so awakened as never to sleep any more. The souls of men are sometimes jogged⁴ and startled in this world by the works or rods of God, but presently they sleep again and forget all; but hereafter, the eyes of their souls will be continually held waking to behold and consider their misery; their understandings will be clear and most apprehensive; their thoughts fixed and determined; their consciences active and efficacious;⁵ and by all this, their capacity to take in the fullest of their misery will be enlarged to the uttermost.

The wrath, indignation, and revenge of God poured out as the just reward of sin upon the capacious souls of the damned are the principal part of their misery in hell...The souls of the damned can hold more misery than all the creatures can inflict upon them. When the soul suffers from the hand of man, its sufferings are either by way of sympathy with the body, or if immediately,⁶ yet it is but a light stroke the hand of a creature can give. But when it hath to do with a sin-revenging God, and that immediately, this stroke cuts off the spirit of man, as it is expressed (Psa 88:16).

The body is the clothing of the soul. Most of the arrows shot at the soul in this world do but stick in the clothes, i.e., reach the outward man; but in hell, the spirit of man is the white⁷ at which God Himself shoots. All His envenomed⁸ arrows strike the soul, which is, after death, laid bare and naked to be wounded by His hand. At death, the soul of every wicked man immediately falls into the hands of the living God. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God,” as the apostle speaks (Heb 10:31). Their punishment is “from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power” (2Th 1:9). They are not put over to their fellow-creatures to be punished, but God will do it Himself and glorify His power as well as His justice in their punishment. The

³ **benumbed** – deadened.

⁴ **jogged** – shaken.

⁵ **efficacious** – producing the intended effect.

⁶ **immediately** – directly.

⁷ **white** – bullseye (some ancient targets had a white bullseye).

⁸ **envenomed** – smeared with poison.

wrath of God lies immediately upon their spirits, and this is the fiery indignation which devoureth their adversaries (Heb 10:27)—a fire that licks up the very spirit of man. Who knoweth the power of His anger (Psa 90:11)? How insupportable it is, you may a little guess by that expression of the prophet Nahum: “The mountains quake at him, and the hills melt, and the earth is burned at his presence, yes, the world, and all that dwell therein. Who can stand before his indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger? his fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by him” (Nah 1:5-6).

And, as if anger and wrath were not words of a sufficient edge and sharpness, it is called *fiery indignation* and *vengeance*, words denoting the most intense degree of divine wrath. For indeed His power is to be glorified in the destruction of His enemies, and therefore now He will do it to purpose. He takes them now into His own hands. No creature can come at the soul immediately: that is God’s prerogative.⁹ And now He hath to deal with it in fury, and revenge is poured out. “Can thine heart endure, or can thine hands be strong, in the days that I shall deal with thee?” (Eze 22:14). Alas! The spirit quails¹⁰ and dies under it. This is the hell of hells.

What doleful¹¹ cries and lamentings have we heard from God’s dearest children when but some few drops of His anger have been sprinkled upon their souls here in this world! But alas, there is no comparison betwixt the anger or fatherly discipline of God over the spirits of His children, and the indignation poured out from the beginning of revenges upon His enemies.

The separate spirit of a damned man becomes a tormentor to itself by the various and efficacious actings of its own conscience, which are a special part of its torment in the other world. Conscience, which should have been the sinner’s curb on earth, becomes the whip that must lash his soul in hell. Neither is there any faculty or power belonging to the soul of man so fit and able to do it as his own conscience. That which was the seat and center of all guilt now becomes the seat and center of all torments. The suspension of its tormenting power in this world is a mystery and wonder to all that duly consider it. For certainly, should the Lord let a sinner’s conscience fly upon him with rage amid his sins and pleasures, it would put him into a hell upon earth, as we see in the doleful instances of Judas, Spira, etc. But, generally,

⁹ **prerogative** – exclusive right.

¹⁰ **quails** – feels fear.

¹¹ **doleful** – sorrowful; mournful.

He keeps a hand of restraint upon them in this life and suffers them to sleep quietly by a grumbling or seared conscience, which couches¹² by them as a sleepy lion and lets them alone.

But no sooner is the Christless soul turned out of the body and cast [into hell] for eternity at the bar of God, but conscience is roused and put into a rage never to be appeased anymore. It now racks and tortures the miserable soul with its utmost efficacy and activity. The mere presages and forebodings¹³ of wrath by the consciences of sinners in this world have made them lie with a ghastly paleness in their faces, universal trembling in all their members, a cold sweating horror upon their panting bosoms like men already in hell. But this, all this, is but as the sweating of the stones before the great rain falls. The activities of conscience (especially in hell) are various, vigorous, and dreadful to consider, such are its *recognitions, accusations, condemnations, upbraidings*,¹⁴ *shamings*, and *fearful expectations*.

1. The consciences of the damned will recognize and bring back the sins committed in this world fresh to their mind. For what is conscience but a register, or book of records, wherein *every* sin is ranked in its proper place and order! This act of conscience is fundamental to all its other acts: for it cannot accuse, condemn, upbraid, or shame us for what it hath lost out of its memory and hath no sense of. “Son, remember,” said Abraham to Dives,¹⁵ amid his torments. This remembrance of sins past, mercies past, opportunities past, but especially of hope past and gone with them, never to be recovered anymore, is like that fire not blown (of which Zophar speaks), which consumes him, or the glittering sword coming out of his gall (Job 20:24).

2. It chargeth and accuseth the damned soul. Its charges are home, positive, and self-evident charges. A thousand legal and unexceptionable¹⁶ witnesses cannot confirm any point more than one witness in a man’s bosom can do (1Jo 2:15). It convicts and stops their mouths, leaving them without any excuse or apology. Just and righteous are the judgments of God upon thee, saith conscience. In all this ocean of misery, there is not one drop of injury or wrong. The judgment of God is according to truth.

3. It condemns as well as chargeth and witnesseth, and that with a dreadful sentence. Backing and approving the sentence and judgment

¹² **couches** – lies down.

¹³ **presages and forebodings** – signs that something will happen and feelings of evil to come.

¹⁴ **upbraidings** – severe scoldings; angry rebukes.

¹⁵ **Dives** – (dī’-vêz; from the Latin Vulgate) rich man at whose gate Lazarus lay (Luk 16:19-31).

¹⁶ **unexceptionable** – beyond criticism or objection.

of God (1Jo 3:21), every self-destroyer will be a self-condemner. This is a prime part of their misery.

4. The upbraidings of conscience in hell are terrible and insufferable things. [If we do not repent, we will] be continually hit in the teeth and twitted¹⁷ with our madness, willfulness, and obstinacy¹⁸ as the cause of all that eternal misery that we have pulled down upon our own heads! What is it but the rubbing of the wound with salt and vinegar? Of this torment, holy Job was afraid and therefore resolved what in him lay to prevent it, when he saith, “My heart [i.e., *conscience*] shall not reproach me so long as I live” (Job 27:6). Oh, the twits and taunts¹⁹ of conscience are cruel cuts and lashes to the soul!

5. The shamings of conscience are insufferable torments. Shame ariseth from the turpitude²⁰ of discovered actions. If some men’s secret filthinesses were but published in this world, it would confound them. What, then, will it be when all shall lie open, as it will, after this life, and their own consciences shall cast the shame of all upon them? They shall not only be derided²¹ by God (Pro 1:26) but by their own consciences.

From *The Whole Works of the Reverend John Flavel*, Vol. 3 (London; Edinburgh; Dublin: W. Baynes and Son; Waugh and Innes; M. Keene, 1820), 135-139; in the public domain.



We should not sin in hope of concealment. What if thou conceal it from all others: canst thou conceal [it from] thy own conscience? As one saith well, “What good is it for thee that none knows what is done when thou knowest it thyself? What profit is it for him who hath a conscience that will accuse him that he hath no man to accuse him but himself? He is a thousand witnesses to himself.” Conscience is not a private witness. It is a thousand witnesses. Therefore, never sin in hope to have it concealed. It is better that all men should know it than that thyself should know it. All will be one day written in thy forehead. Conscience will be a blab. 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. Never sin, therefore, in hope of concealment. Conscience is a witness. We have the witness in us; and as Isaiah saith, “Our sins testify against us” (Isa 59:12). It is in vain to look for secrecy. Conscience will discover all.

—Richard Sibbes

Conscience is a private Judgment Day before the public Day of Judgment; and it is a [bad sign] that most people will never stand upright in the court of heaven because they stand accused and condemned in the court of conscience.—Edmund Calamy

¹⁷ **twitted** – condemned as a fault; rebuked.

¹⁸ **obstinacy** – stubbornness.

¹⁹ **twits and taunts** – rebukes and mocking reproaches.

²⁰ **turpitude** – shameful character; moral perversion.

²¹ **derided** – laughed at scornfully.

A GOOD CONSCIENCE

Arthur W. Pink (1886-1952)

Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly.—Hebrews 13:18

THIS expression, “a good conscience,” occurs in several other passages in the New Testament. Because of its deep importance, it calls for our closest attention. Much is said in the Word about conscience, and much depends upon our having and preserving a good one. Therefore, it behooves us to give our best consideration to this weighty subject. Not only is it one of great practical moment, but it is especially timely in view of the conscienceless day in which we live...

Now conscience is either good or evil, according as it is governed by the revealed will of God. Briefly, the *evil* conscience first: this is of several kinds. There is the ignorant and darkened conscience, relatively so and not absolutely, for all...possess rationality and the light of nature. This is the condition of the heathen, and alas, of an increasing number in Christendom, who are reared in homes where God is utterly ignored. Then there is the brazen¹ and defiant conscience, which blatantly refuses to be in subjection to God’s known will; such was the case with Pharaoh. In the case of Herod, we see a bribed conscience, pretending that his oath obliged him to behead John the Baptist. The seared and insensible conscience (1Ti 4:2) pertains to those who have long resisted the light and are given over by God to a reprobate² mind. The despairing and desperate conscience leads its possessor to lay violent hands upon himself.

At the new birth, the conscience is renewed, being greatly quickened and enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Through the exercise of faith, the conscience is purified (Act 15:9), being cleansed by an appropriation of the blood of Christ (Heb 9:14). A good conscience may be defined as one that is *set to please God in all things*, for it hates sin and loves holiness. It is governed by the Word, being in subjection to the authority of its Author. Its binding rule is obedience to God and to Him alone, refusing to act apart from His light. Consequently, the more conscientious the Christian is, the more he refuses all domination (the

¹ **brazen** – shameless.

² **reprobate** – rejected by God.

traditions and opinions of man) that is not divine, and the more likely is he to gain the reputation of being conceited and intractable.³ Nevertheless, each of us must be much on his guard lest he mistake pride and self-will for conscientious scruples. There is a vast difference between firmness and an unteachable spirit, as there is between meekness and fickleness.⁴

How is a good and pure conscience obtained? Briefly, by getting it rightly informed and by casting out its filth through penitential⁵ confession. The first great need of conscience is *light*, for ignorance corrupts it. “That the soul be without knowledge, it is not good” (Pro 19:2). As a judge that understands not the laws of his country is unfit to give judgment on any matter that comes before him, or as a dim eye cannot properly perform its office, so a blind or uninformed conscience is incapable to judge of our duty before God. Conscience cannot take God’s part unless it knows His will; and for a full acquaintance with that, we must daily read and search the Scriptures. “Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word” (Psa 119:9). Oh, to be able to say, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Psa 119:105).

Let us now mention some of the qualities or characteristics of a good conscience. First, *sincerity*. Alas, how little of this virtue is left in the world: what shams and hypocrisy now obtain on every side—in the religious, the political, the commercial, and the social realm. This is a conscienceless generation; consequently, there is little or no honesty, fidelity, or reality. That which now regulates the average person is a temporary expediency⁶ rather than acting according to principle. But it is otherwise with the regenerate.⁷ The fear of the Lord has been planted in his heart; therefore, can he say with the apostle, “We trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly” (Heb 13:18). A sincere conscience genuinely desires to know God’s will and is truly determined to be in subjection thereto. Guile⁸ has received its death wound, and the heart is open to the light, ready to be searched thereby.

Tenderness is another property of a good conscience. By this quality

³ **intractable** – stubborn; hard to deal with; unmanageable.

⁴ **meekness and fickleness** – humility and changeableness.

⁵ **penitential** – expressing sorrow for sin.

⁶ **expediency** – quality of being convenient and practical despite possibly being improper or immoral; inclination towards methods that are advantageous rather than fair or just.

⁷ **regenerate** – those who have been born again by the Holy Spirit.

⁸ **guile** – deceit.

is meant a wakefulness of heart so that it smites for sin upon all occasions offered. So far from being indifferent to God's claims, the heart is acutely sensitive when it has been ignored. Even for what many consider trifling matters, a tender conscience will chide⁹ and condemn. Job resolved to preserve a tender conscience when he said, "My heart shall not reproach me so long as I live" (Job 27:6). Again, we may understand this characteristic from its opposite, namely, a seared conscience (1Ti 4:2), which is contracted by a habitual practice of that which is evil, the heart becoming as hard as the public highway. Pray frequently for a tender conscience, dear reader.

Fidelity. When conscience faithfully discharges its office, there is a constant judging of our state before God as a measuring of our ways by His Holy Word. Thus, the apostle Paul could say, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day" (Act 23:1). The favorable judgment that others may entertain of him will afford no satisfaction to an upright man unless he has the testimony of conscience that his conduct is right in the sight of God. No matter what the fashions of the hour or the common custom of his fellows may be, one whose heart beats true to God will not do anything knowingly against conscience. His language will ever be, "whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye" (Act 4:19). On the other hand, his frequent prayer is, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psa 139:23-24).

Tranquility. This is the sure reward of sincerity and fidelity, for Wisdom's ways (in contrast from those of folly) "are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace" (Pro 3:17). An offended conscience will offend us, and "a wounded spirit who can bear?" (Pro 18:14). The Christian may as well expect to touch a live coal without pain as to sin without trouble of conscience. But a clear conscience is quiet, condemning not, being unburdened by the guilt of sin. When we walk closely with God, there is a serenity of mind and peace of heart that is the very opposite of the state of those who are lawless and disobedient. "The wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest" (Isa 57:20). The tranquility of a good conscience is an earnest of the undisturbed calm that awaits us on high.

But let it be pointed out that every peaceful conscience is not a good one, nor is every uneasy conscience an evil one. The conscience of some

⁹ **chide** – rebuke; scold.

is quiet because it is insensible. “When a strong man armed keepeth his palace, his goods are in peace” (Luk 11:21). That is a quiet, evil conscience because [it has been] put to sleep by the opiates of Satan. True tranquility of conscience is to be determined from the other properties: it must issue from sincerity, tenderness, and fidelity, or otherwise it is a seared one. We must consider not how much inward peace we have, but how much *cause*. As in a building, not the fairness of the structure, but the *foundation* of it is to be most regarded. On the other hand, a tender conscience is liable to err through lack of sufficient light and needlessly write bitter things against itself, which is a “weak conscience” (1Co 8:12), as we may also be troubled by sins already pardoned.

Now a good conscience can only be maintained by constant diligence: “Herein do I exercise myself to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men” (Act 24:16). The apostle made it his daily employment to keep his conscience clear that it might not justly accuse him of anything, so that he should have the witness in his own heart that his character and conduct were pleasing in the sight of the Holy One. The maintenance of a good conscience is an essential part of personal piety.¹⁰ “This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy...Holding faith, and a good conscience” (1Ti 1:18-19) That is the sum of personal godliness—faith being the principle of things to be believed by us, conscience [being] the principle of the things to be done. Faith and a good conscience are linked together again in 1 Timothy 1:5 and 3:9, for we cannot hold the one without the other.

If the reader will turn back to Acts 24, he will find that Paul was replying to charges brought against him. In verses 14-16, he made his defense, giving therein a brief epitome¹¹ of practical and experimental Christianity. As the foundation, he gives an account of his faith: “Believing all things which are written,” as the immediate proof thereof, “and have hope toward God”; and then a brief account of his conversation: “herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence.” A saving knowledge of the truth, then, is such a belief of the Scriptures as produces a hope of eternal life, which is evidenced by a keeping of the heart with all diligence. The same is enumerated again in “the end of the commandment” (the design of the gospel institution), [which] is that love [that] fulfils the Law, issuing from a heart that beats true to God (1Ti 1:5).

“Herein do I *exercise* myself”: we must make it our constant endeavor.

¹⁰ **piety** – godliness.

¹¹ **epitome** – summary or condensed account of anything.

First, by a diligent and daily searching of the Scriptures that we may discover the will of God. We are exhorted, “Be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is” (Eph 5:17), and this in order that we may ascertain what is pleasing to Him, so that we offend not either in belief or worship. A conscience ill-informed is, at best, a weak and ignorant one.

Second, by a serious inquiry into the state of our heart and ways: “Stand in awe, and sin not: commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still” (Psa 4:4). We need to frequently challenge and call ourselves to account. If we would have conscience speak to us, we must speak often to it. It is given us for this very reason, that we may judge of our state and actions with respect to the judgment of God. Then “let us search and try our ways” (Lam 3:40). Take time, dear reader, to parley¹² with yourself and consider how matters stand between you and God. Short reckonings prevent mistakes, so review each day and put right what has come between you and God.

Third, a uniform course of obedience: “Hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him” (1Jo 3:19).

Fourth, by a constant alertness: “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation” (Mat 26:41).

Fifth, by a serious resistance and mortification¹³ of sin: cutting off the right hand and putting out the right eye.

Sixth, by a sincere repentance and confession when conscious of failure.

Seventh, by faith’s appropriation of the cleansing blood of Christ.

From *Studies in the Scriptures*, January 1938; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.



Jesus Christ has offered so all-sufficient a satisfaction for all the claims of injured justice that now God hath no fault to find with His children. He seeth no sin in Jacob, nor iniquity in Israel (Num 23:21), nor is He angry with them on account of their sins—a peace unbroken and unspeakable being established by the atonement that Christ hath made on their behalf. Hence flows a peace experienced in the conscience...for when the conscience sees that God is satisfied and is no longer at war with it, then it also becomes satisfied with man; and conscience, which was wont to be a great disturber of the peace of the heart, now gives its verdict of acquittal; and the heart sleeps in the arms of conscience and finds a quiet resting place there.

—Charles Spurgeon

¹² **parley** – discuss.

¹³ **mortification** – putting to death; see Free Grace Broadcaster 201, *Mortification*; available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

A PEACEFUL CONSCIENCE

J. C. Ryle (1816-1900)

CHRIST, in one word, has lived for the true Christian. Christ has died for him. Christ has gone to the grave for him. Christ has risen again for him. Christ has ascended on high for him and gone into heaven to intercede for his soul. Christ has done all, paid all, suffered all that was needful for his redemption. Hence arises the true Christian's justification—hence his peace. In himself, there is nothing; but in Christ he has all things that his soul can require (Col 2:3; 3:11).

Who can tell the blessedness of the exchange that takes place between the true Christian and the Lord Jesus Christ! Christ's righteousness is placed upon him, and his sins are placed upon Christ. Christ has been reckoned a sinner for his sake, and now he is reckoned innocent for Christ's sake. Christ has been condemned for his sake though there was no fault in Him, and now he is acquitted for Christ's sake, though he is covered with sins, faults, and shortcomings. Here is wisdom indeed! God can now be just and yet pardon the ungodly. Man can feel that he is a sinner, and yet have a good hope of heaven and feel peace within. Who among men could have imagined such a thing? Who ought not to admire it when he hears it? (2Co 5:21).

We read in gospel history of a display of love... We read of Jesus, the Son of God, coming down to a world of sinners, who neither cared for Him before He came nor honored Him when He appeared. We read of Him going down to the prison house and submitting to be bound, that we the poor prisoners might be able to go free. We read of Him becoming obedient to death—and that the death of the cross—that we the unworthy children of Adam might have a door opened to life everlasting. We read of Him being content to bear our sins and carry our transgressions that we might wear His righteousness and walk in the light and liberty of the sons of God (Phi 2:8, 15).

This may well be called a love that “passeth knowledge” (Eph 3:19)! In no way could free grace ever have shone so brightly as in the way of *justification by Christ* (Eph 3:19).

This is *the old way* by which alone the children of Adam who have been justified from the beginning of the world have found their peace. From Abel downwards, no person has ever had one drop of mercy except through Christ. To Him every altar that was raised before the time

of Moses was intended to point. To Him every sacrifice and ordinance of the Jewish law was meant to direct the children of Israel. Of Him all the prophets testified. In a word, if you lose sight of justification by Christ, a large part of the Old Testament Scripture will become an unmeaning, tangled maze.

This is the way of justification that exactly *meets the wants and requirements of human nature*. There is a conscience left in man, although he is a fallen being. There is a dim sense of his own need, which in his better moments will make itself heard, and which nothing but Christ can satisfy. So long as his conscience is not hungry, any religious toy will satisfy a man's soul and keep him quiet. But once let his conscience become hungry, and nothing will quiet him but spiritual food—and no food but Christ.

There is something within a man when his conscience is really awake, which whispers, "There must be a price paid for my soul, or no peace." At once, the gospel meets him with Christ. Christ has already paid a ransom for his redemption. Christ has given Himself for him. Christ has redeemed him from the curse of the law, being made a curse for him (Gal 2:20; 3:13).

There is something within a man when his conscience is really awake, which whispers, "I must have some righteousness or title to heaven, or no peace." At once, the gospel meets him with Christ. He has brought in an "everlasting righteousness" (Dan 9:24). He "is the end of the law for righteousness" (Rom 10:4). His name is called "THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Jer 23:6). God has "made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2Co 5:21).

There is something within a man when his conscience is really awake, which whispers, "There must be punishment and suffering because of my sins, or no peace." At once, the gospel meets him with Christ. Christ hath suffered for sin, the just for the unjust, to bring him to God (1Pe 3:18). He bore our sins in His own body on the tree. By His stripes we are healed (1Pe 2:24).

There is something within a man when his conscience is really awake, which whispers, "I must have a priest for my soul, or no peace." At once, the gospel meets him with Christ. Christ is sealed and appointed by God the Father to be the Mediator between Himself and man. He is the ordained Advocate for sinners. He is the accredited Counsellor and Physician of sick souls. He is the great High Priest, the Almighty Absolver, the Gracious Confessor of heavy-laden sinners (1Ti 2:5; Heb 8:1).

I know there are thousands of professing Christians who see no peculiar beauty in this doctrine of justification by Christ. Their hearts are buried in the things of the world. Their consciences are palsied,¹ benumbed, and speechless. But whenever a man's conscience begins really to feel and speak, he will see something in Christ's atonement and priestly office that he never saw before. Light does not suit the eye nor music the ear more perfectly than Christ suits the real wants of a sinful soul. Hundreds can testify that the experience of a converted heathen in the island of Raiatea in the South Pacific Ocean has been exactly their own. "I saw," he said, "an immense mountain, with precipitous sides, up which I endeavored to climb, but when I had attained a considerable height, I lost my hold and fell to the bottom. Exhausted with perplexity and fatigue, I went to a distance and sat down to weep; and while weeping, I saw a drop of blood fall upon that mountain, and in a moment, it was dissolved." He was asked to explain what all this meant. "That mountain," he said, "was my sins; and that drop which fell upon it was one drop of the precious blood of Jesus, by which the mountain of my guilt was melted away."²

This is the one true way of peace: justification by Christ. Beware lest any turn you out of this way and lead you into any of the false doctrines of the Church of Rome. Alas, it is wonderful to see how that [tradition] has built a house of error hard by the house of truth! Hold fast the truth of God about justification and be not deceived. Listen not to anything you may hear about other mediators and helpers to peace. Remember there is no *mediator* but one—Jesus Christ; no *purgatory* for sinners but one—the blood of Christ; no *sacrifice* for sin but one—the sacrifice once made on the cross; no *works* that can merit anything but the work of Christ; no *priest* that can truly absolve but Christ. Stand fast here and be on your guard. Give not the glory due to Christ to another.

What do you know of Christ? I doubt not you have heard of Him by the hearing of the ear... You are acquainted perhaps with the story of His life and death. But what experimental knowledge have you of Him? What practical use do you make of Him? What dealings and transactions have there been between your soul and Him?

Oh, believe me, there is *no peace with God excepting through Christ!* Peace is His peculiar gift. Peace is the legacy that He alone had power to leave behind Him when He left the world. All other peace beside this

¹ **palsied** – paralyzed.

² John Williams, *A Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands* (London: J. Snow, 1837), 370-371.

is a mockery and a delusion. When hunger can be relieved without food, thirst quenched without drink, and weariness removed without rest, then, and not until then, will men find peace without Christ.

Now, is this peace your own? Bought by Christ with His own blood, offered by Christ freely to all who are willing to receive it—is this peace your own? Oh, rest not! Rest not until you can give a satisfactory answer to my question: HAVE YOU PEACE?

From Old Paths: Being Plain Statements of Some of the Weightier Matters of Christianity (London: Charles J. Thynne, 1898), 221;
in the public domain.

J. C. Ryle (1816-1900): Bishop of the Anglican Church; born at Macclesfield, Cheshire County, England, UK.



Joy of conscience is the greatest joy, as trouble of conscience is the greatest trouble. When conscience bears its testimony with us and for us, how full of joy is the soul, even amid the deepest sorrows and greatest sufferings! A good conscience hath sure confidence, and he that hath it sits Noah-like—quiet in the greatest combustions; freed, if not from the common destruction, yet from the common distraction. A good conscience is an impregnable fort...It will enable a man to stand against the fiercest batteries of men and devils. A good conscience will fill a man with courage and comfort amid all his troubles and distresses. Paul had enough to say for himself when standing before the council, “Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day” (Act 23:1-2). And though as soon as he had said so, Ananias commanded to smite him on the mouth, yet he bears up bravely because his conscience did not smite him but [did] acquit him...A good conscience is a paradise in a wilderness; it is riches in poverty, health in sickness, strength in weakness, liberty in bonds, and life in death (Isa 38:3). A good conscience will enable a man to triumph over innumerable evils, yes, over death itself. Death to such a person is not the king of terrors, but the king of desires (Phi 1:23). A good conscience will be a Christian’s best friend in the worst times: it will be a sword to defend him, a staff to support him, a pillar of fire to lead him, a Joseph to nourish him, a Dorcas to clothe him, a Canaan to refresh him, and a feast to delight him: “He that is of a merry heart hath a continual feast” (Pro 15:15). Now there is nothing that can make a man divinely merry below a good conscience. “A good conscience,” saith one, “is the bed of God, the palace of Christ, the habitation of the Holy Ghost, the paradise of delights, and wherein every tree yieldeth a feast.” “The tranquility of conscience and the security of innocence excel all the things that the world counteth good.” He that hath a good conscience enjoys a continual serenity and sits continually at that blessed feast, whereat the blessed angels are cooks and butlers, as Luther hath it, and the three persons in Trinity glad guests.

All other feasts to this of a good conscience are stark hunger...The best way in this world for a man to turn his whole life into a merry festival is to get and keep a good conscience.

—Thomas Brooks

A LITTLE RELIGION FOR CONSCIENCE'S SAKE

Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892)

THERE is yet another class,¹ and when I have referred to them I will mention no more. These are the people who take up with religion for the sake of *quieting their conscience*; and it is astonishing how *little* of religion will sometimes do that.

Some people tell us that if in the time of storm men would pour bottles of oil upon the waves, there would be a great calm at once. I have never tried it, and it is most probable I never shall, for my organ of credulity is not large enough to accept so extensive a statement. But there are some people who think that they can calm the storm of a troubled conscience by pouring a little of the oil of a profession about religion upon it. It is *amazing* how wonderful an effect this really has! I have known a man who was drunk many times in a week and who got his money dishonestly; yet he always had an easy conscience by going to his church or chapel regularly on Sunday. We have heard of a man who could “devour widows’ houses” (Mat 23:14)—a lawyer who could swallow up everything that came in his way, and yet he would never go to bed without saying his prayers. That stilled his conscience. We have heard of other persons, especially among the Romanists, who would not object to thieving, but who would regard eating anything but fish on a Friday as a most fearful sin, supposing that, by making a fast on the Friday, all the iniquities of all the days in the week would be put away.

They want the outward forms of religion to keep the conscience quiet, for *conscience* is one of the worst lodgers to have in your house when he gets quarrelsome. There is no abiding with him. He is an ill bedfellow:² ill at lying down and equally troublesome at rising up. A guilty conscience is one of the curses of the world: it puts out the sun and takes away the brightness from the moonbeam. A guilty conscience casts a noxious³ exhalation through the air, removes the beauty from the landscape, the glory from the flowing river, the majesty from the

¹ **EDITOR’S NOTE:** The author has mentioned classes of people who take up religion for different reasons: those who do so to be respectable, who desire to be considered preeminently saints, and who take it up for what they can get by it.

² **ill bedfellow** – disagreeable companion.

³ **noxious** – poisonous.

rolling floods. There is nothing beautiful to the man that has a guilty conscience. He needs no accusing: *everything* accuses him. Hence people take up with religion just to quiet them. They take the sacrament sometimes; they go to a place of worship; they sing a hymn now and then; they give a guinea⁴ to a charity; they intend to leave a portion in their will to build alms houses; and in this way, conscience is lulled asleep. They rock him to and fro with religious observances until there he sleeps while they sing over him the lullaby of hypocrisy, and he wakes not until he shall wake with that rich man who was here clothed in purple, but in the next world did lift up his eyes in hell, being in torments without a drop of water to cool his burning tongue (Luk 16).

What, then, is it for which we ought to run in this race? Why heaven, eternal life, justification by faith, the pardon of sin, acceptance in the Beloved, and glory everlasting. If you run for anything else than salvation, should you win, what you have won is not worth the running for. Oh! I beseech every one of you, make sure work for eternity! Never be contented with anything less than a living faith in a living Savior; rest not until you are certain that the Holy Spirit is at work in your souls. Do not think that the outside of religion can be of use to you: it is just the inward part of religion that God loveth. Seek to have a repentance that needeth not to be repented of—a faith that looks alone to Christ and that will stand by you when you come into the swellings of Jordan.⁵ Seek to have a love that is not like a transient flame, burning for a moment and then extinguished; but a flame that shall increase and increase, and still increase, until your heart shall be swallowed up therein and Jesus Christ's one name shall be the sole object of your affection. We must, in running the heavenly race, set nothing less before us than that which Christ did set before Him. He set the joy of salvation before Himself, and then He did run, despising the cross and enduring the shame. So let us do; and may God give us good success, that by His good Spirit we may attain unto eternal life through the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord!

From a sermon delivered on Friday afternoon, June 11, 1858,
on the Grandstand, Epsom Racecourse.

Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892): Influential English Baptist preacher; born at Kelvedon, Essex, England, UK.



⁴ guinea – British gold coin.

⁵ swellings of Jordan – death.