

Romans 2:12-16 Let your conscience be your guide



[Watch this clip from the end of the Disney version of Pinocchio](#) (by Carlo Collodi).

Note the phrases: "Always let your conscience be your guide" and "You want to be a real boy, don't you?"

We are created as moral beings knowing right from wrong. This is how we are made, all of us. From creation. You can see this in small children – they have an innate sense of the conscience before they can even start thinking about it.

What is our conscience?

It isn't when we think through a question of what is right or wrong. It happens before we engage our brains. It is intuition, an inner voice which warns us beforehand that something is right or wrong and tells us afterwards whether it was right or wrong.



Van Gogh described conscience as "Man's compass." It's a compass that directs us how to behave and it's a magnet to draw us to repentance when we have done wrong. It resonates with the gospel in identifying sin and revealing the need for repentance.

It is not power, it's just a voice, but one speaks from the depth of our souls. You are still left with a choice. You still have to exercise your will, make a decision, make choices that resonate with the Gospel. But to have a strong and well developed conscience is a comforting guide and a reassuring arm around our shoulders as we navigate the difficult questions of life.

Sometimes we have thought about things so much that we have drifted a long way off course and need to go back to our conscience and ask, "What's the right thing to do in this situation?"

Our conscience hums a tune we recognise as good but quietly enough for us to sing a different tune louder. The tune of conscience, when we hear it, prompts us to think that there may be another way, an alternative, something from a different place, a right and a wrong that was in place before we had a chance to even think about it.



The Disney story of Pinocchio has conscience as a cricket in a top hat waiting for us to whistle a little tune to call him into action. That is not quite right of course although it works for the cartoon. The voice of conscience speaks to us before we have a chance to think about an issue, never mind whistle a tune.

The 18C German philosopher Immanuel Kant said that the conscience indicated a Categorical Imperative: something that is right whether or not it feels good to us. There is an "I ought" which precedes Descartes' "I think". This led Kant to establish the principle that a person is valuable as an end in themselves not as a means to an end. This in turn has been a huge influence in the development of human rights over the last couple of centuries.

So if that's what conscience is, that voice that speaks before we think to tell us what is right and wrong -

Where does conscience come from?

Our conscience comes from our nature:

Romans 2:14, "the Gentiles do by nature the things required of the law."

Our conscience speaks from our soul and is not a faculty that is possessed by any other creature. It's one of the essential things that makes us human. Our conscience reminds us that we have a soul, we are created by God and that there is a better way. Our conscience is an internal sense that harks to a deeper, older, universal law – something beyond our own legal system or even our parents' moral code. It requires an external point of reference and implies that there are Moral Absolutes. This is not a popular belief these days where relative morality and tolerance are pursued. "Anything is OK if it doesn't hurt anyone".

The problem comes when I think something is okay and you don't. How do we decide? Some moral questions can't be answered without reference to a greater authority- a categorical imperative. That's why the Judeo-Christian heritage of the 10 commandments and Jesus' teachings are so influential in many of the world's legal systems – because we recognise in them an objective morality.

"If there is no God, everything is permitted." says Ivan in the Brothers Karamazov (by Dostoevsky - who was a Christian).

Interestingly, the atheist Nietzsche, the 19C German philosopher, famous for arguing "The Death of God" agreed. He saw it clearly. If there is no God, he said, no moral point of reference, no basis for our claims of right and wrong, if we are just evolved fish, upright animals that have walked out of the jungle, then violence, abuse, self-interest, and oppression is just "monkey-business". If there is no God, everything is morally permissible.

This gave rise to Hitler's concentration camps and we just know it isn't right. But people struggle to accept the alternative - that there is a God and a Moral Absolute.

Jenni Murray, the broadcaster, is an atheist and says what I hear many modern, humanist, liberals say, "I don't have a spiritual life at all. I have a very practical, deeply moral side" And when asked where this morality comes from, she says "It's based on what I've worked out for myself, I think."

But you can't have it both ways – if you're a Christian you work from the belief that there is a loving God who has given us a conscience to guide us in his way of living. If you don't believe in God, there is no reference point for how to live and everything is permissible. You can't have a baseless "deeply moral side."

Although our conscience doesn't prove the existence of God it is clearly something that points in that direction. This is one of the ways in which we build our understanding of there being a God.

What can happen to our conscience?

Conscience is an inner voice and it is one that can get strengthened or silenced. It can be well tuned or can go out of tune. It is remarkably hardy and can survive quite a battering but it can be damaged. The bible talks about the conscience being: Seared, Corrupted, Defiled, Weakened.

"Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron." (1 Timothy 4:2)

"To those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted." (Titus 1:15)

"Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled." (1 Corinthians 8:7ff).

Weakened consciences

Paul goes on to say that we must be careful not to lead people with weaker consciences than ours into doing things which may be okay for us but which would be a breach of their conscience. He is saying that some matters are not ethically categorical but they may be an issue for someone with a weak conscience and that, in this case, it is most important to help people obey their conscience.

What happens if our conscience seared, corrupted, weak?

There are plenty of examples around us of the after effects of either ignoring our conscience or allowing it to get corrupted, defiled and seared.

How do we tend to our conscience? How do you get better at hearing it?

- soak yourself in scripture
- spend time in prayer & meditation
- worship – move from worshipping idols to worshipping God
- move from being self-centred to Christ-centred – decisions, values, money, time
- community – weekly worship, housegroup, mentors

What is the result of a healthy conscience?

Why bother? Why do we want a healthy conscience? Apart from avoiding the calamities that follow from a damaged or absent conscience?

Because living in harmony with your conscience, living free from sin, means you are living as you are made to be. Human, whole, soulful.

It's what Jiminy Cricket says to Pinocchio, "You want to be a real boy, don't you".

We don't want to be puppets – hanging on the strings of our own distorted thinking or others' manipulation. We want to be autonomous humans, men and women. Real people.

You can only be truly human if your conscience is your guide. When we stop listening to our conscience our humanity is eroded. In verses 14 & 15 Paul describes the Gentiles, us, as having a "conscience by nature", it's "written on our hearts". In other words living in accord with our conscience is essential to our humanity.

John Stott said, "We are only authentically human when we obey our conscience."

Summary

Conscience speaks:

- Before we act, before we think about acting, listen to the voice and let it be your guide to knowing right & wrong, keeping you from sin, keeping you human.
- After we act it tells us what we have done, right or wrong. It may not be as visible as Pinocchio's nose – but it does the same thing! What happens when you have gone against your conscience? When you have sinned? You know that you have done something wrong.

Some of you have a conscience which works overtime to condemn you, keep you in shame and your nose growing. This is a falsely empowered conscience. The truth is:

1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

What I would love you to hear is that God loves you, through Jesus you can be forgiven and you can stop worrying about how badly you've done and how rubbish you are and instead receive his forgiveness, reclaim your humanity, be declared righteous, lift up your head and join in with God's purpose and plan for your life.

Conclusion

Your conscience is an essential part of who you are, God created you with a good conscience. It is not there to make decisions for you, it has no right to chirp away condemning you. It is a voice from your soul reminding you that there is a God who made you to live in a really good way, showing you what is right and what is wrong.

May you then, be filled with God's Holy Spirit and with power to walk a righteous path. May you know full forgiveness, be fully satisfied, fully free, fully human.