

Living with A Clear Conscience

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Even though Christian spirituality has to do with a way of life, it is not just a religious philosophy of life that helps us to understand our place in God's world, nor is it just a religious code of behaviour that maps out how best to live the spiritual life here on earth. Its main focus is not on how to think or feel or act religiously, but on how to live, like St Paul, with a good clear conscience before God and the people around us (Acts 23:1; 24:16; 2 Tim 1:3). Its basic premise is that, for better or worse, the state of our conscience colours our experience of God. Paul sums up this point well when he writes these words in Titus 1:15-16:

To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelievers, nothing is pure; but both their minds and consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for any good work.

Let me explain what Paul is getting at. How we receive God and respond to his word depends on the state of our conscience. Take a mirror! If it is stained, or if its surface is not uneven, it does not receive and accurately reflect what is in front of it. The cleaner the mirror, the clearer its reception and reflection of the light. Or take a pool of water! If it is muddy and dirty, the light of the sun magnifies its darkness. If it is clear, the light of the sun not only lights up the water, so that everything in it is visible; the clear water also reflects the whole of the sky above it and everything around it. The clearer the water, the clearer the illumination and reflection. Our conscience is like that mirror and that pool. If it is stained, it does not receive and reflect the light of God; if it is clear, it is filled with the light that enlightens it and gives it insight.

By itself our conscience seems to have little or nothing to do with God. It operates as a kind of internal court of law in which we play all the roles; we sit in the judge's seat and stand in the dock as the person on trial; we act as the counsel for the prosecution and as the counsel for our own defence. By the operation of our conscience, we have the capacity to see ourselves as others see us, to sense how we stand with them and what we need to do to have their acceptance. By sensitising us to how others appraise us, our conscience helps us to assess ourselves in a reasonably honest, balanced way. Unlike sociopaths who seem to be impervious to the community that sustains them, our conscience shows us what we need to do or avoid doing if we are to maintain our social standing.

The problem with our conscience is that while it functions as a kind of internal judge, it does not, by itself, provide any certain criteria by which we can rightly assess ourselves and others. It is like a compass without a magnetic pole. The results of its self-appraisal will differ according to the criteria that it uses. These may be the views of our parents or our friends, the norms of society or the pressure of fashion, our philosophy of life or our personal convictions. All these skew the operation of consciences. We may use these criteria to excuse and affirm ourselves. But that sense of self-justification is short-lived. We end up with an uneasy conscience. Not matter how hard we try to do the right thing by ourselves and others, no matter what criteria we use to evaluate ourselves, we feel that we have failed; we sense that we are not the

kind of people that we should be and that we should like to be. Worst of all, from bitter experience we discover that our conscience is often deluded and clouded by self-interest; it is tainted by our guilt and our shame, our self-righteousness and our anger. These distort its perception and its judgment. They leave us in the dark about ourselves.

The word of God is the light that enlightens our conscience. It is a lamp to our feet and a light for our path (Ps 119:105). God gave us our conscience so that we would know where we stand with him. He designed it so that we could attend to his word and discern his will as revealed in his word. It operates as it should only when it is fully attentive to his word both as law and as gospel. It operates properly only once it has been cleansed from the stain of sin.

God's law as it is summed up in the Ten Commandments diagnoses the state of our conscience. It identifies God as the Judge; it clears away the fog of neurotic and misplaced guilt. Once we attend to it things become clearer for us; we discover the truth about ourselves with respect to God and with respect to those around us. From it we, to our relief, discern what we need to do to please him and to live in harmony with others and his whole creation. Yet that relief is short-lived, for we soon discover that we cannot get rid of our guilt by doing the right thing and keeping the Ten Commandments. The same conscience that has been enlightened by God's diagnosis of us with his law, turns against us and makes us increasingly aware of our sin (Rom 3:20). In the light of his law we realise how completely we are tainted and contaminated both by our own sins and the sins that have been committed against us. And that makes for a bad conscience before God (Heb 10:22).

A bad conscience darkens our souls like nothing else on earth. Nothing is worse, spiritually, than the confusion that it brings. It affects our experience of God and our experience of life as a whole. When we have a bad conscience, we see him as a strict lawgiver and a harsh judge, a moral watchdog and a moral detective, someone who is out to get us. His disapproval of our sin, his anger against injustice, is experienced as his personal disapproval and rejection of us as people. We resent his demands; we fear his condemnation. He seems to act as if he were our enemy. And so we work hard at getting him off our backs. Failing that, we try to avoid him by minimising our contact with him and anything to do with him.

The cloud that comes from his accusation and condemnation affects our whole behaviour. When we have a bad conscience, we cover up our shortcomings and trumpet our achievements before others. A bad conscience distorts the way that we react to approval and disapproval. Both are personalised and exaggerated, misinterpreted and magnified. Our friends are those who affirm us, while our enemies are those who are critical of us. Life becomes an ongoing exercise in self-promotion and self-justification before others. Most of all, we are afraid, afraid of rejection by people and by God, afraid of death and confrontation with God the Judge in the Last Judgment.

Our conscience, however, is only partly enlightened by the law that diagnoses our spiritual impurity; it is fully enlightened by the gospel that cleanses us from that impurity, the good news that we are justified by the grace of God the Father through faith in his beloved Son Jesus. He offered himself as a sacrifice for us and our sins.

His blood now cleanses us from the stain of sin; it alone gives us a clear conscience before God the Father (Heb 9:14; cf. 1 John 1:7-9).¹ Through baptism we receive the great and precious gift of a good conscience before God (Heb 10:22; 1 Pet 3:21).²

There is a close connection between faith and a good conscience (1 Tim 1:5, 19). Through faith in Christ we receive a good conscience. We therefore know that God the Father is as pleased with us as he is with Jesus his Son, because we are united with him. It is true that we are guilty of rebellion against him and have been sentenced to death by him for our rebellion; yet by his grace and mercy we have been pardoned and have been given the gift of eternal life. There is therefore now no condemnation for us who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1); we need no longer fear God's disapproval and displeasure. Because we have a good conscience we may approach God the Father in heaven itself in the full assurance of faith, sure of his acceptance and confident in our prayers (Heb 10:19-22). So, just as through faith in Christ we have a good conscience, a good conscience gives us access to the mystery of faith in Christ (1 Tim 3:9).

Our conscience functions properly when it is governed by faith in God's word; it functions properly as it attends both to the voice of the law and the voice of the gospel. Only as it hears the word of justification do the demands of the law take their proper place. They are not meant to show us how to gain God's approval; they are meant to diagnose our spiritual state before God and to show us who have been justified what kind of behaviour is pleasing to God.

The key to life in the presence of God the Father is a good conscience that comes from the Holy Spirit through the conviction of sin and the assurance of salvation. That, in turn, leads to mental enlightenment by the Spirit, so that we learn to see ourselves and others as God does. It also leads to emotional healing by the Spirit, so that we learn to feel about ourselves and others as God does. It also energises us bodily with the Holy Spirit, so that we are able to work together with God here on earth. The precondition for all that is a clear conscience. A good conscience colours our whole experience of life. By it we become transparent to the light of the Lord and enlightened by his presence.

This means that we will not just have occasional experiences of God's intervention on our journey through life, though we may, of course, have these. Rather, with a good conscience that is attuned to God's word and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, the whole of life becomes the arena for spiritual experience. In the ordinary things that happen to us day by day, we begin to discover the hand of God at work as he provides for us and corrects us, as he judges us and saves us, as he encourages and guides us. By listening to God's word and receiving God's Spirit, we come to discern the presence of Jesus with us at all times and in all places, as we travel with him on our pilgrimage from earth to heaven.

When we have a good conscience, our puzzling journey through life, with all its twists and turns, its troubles and its joys, begins to make sense. We not only make sense of the demands that are made on us and the good things that are given for our enjoyment;

¹ For the New Testament references to a clear conscience, see 1 Tim 3:9; 2 Tim 1:3.

² For the other New Testament references to a good conscience, see Acts 13:1; 1 Tim 1:5, 19; Heb 13:18; 1 Pet 3:16.

we also make sense of what is otherwise senseless, the trials that we suffer and the bad things that happen to us. Here is how Olive Wyon describes the life of faith: *God makes His will known to us through the things that happen every day. God uses everything that takes place to lead us on the path of His will...all we have to do is to accept the will of God as it is made known to us moment by moment, in the guise of a duty to be done, a trial to be borne, a joy to be received; in every experience of life, without exception, God comes to us; if we receive Him humbly we can and will do His will.*³

³ Olive Wyon, *The School of Prayer*, London: SCM, Tenth Edition, 1962, 38