

The Inward Voice

by David Servant

The conscience is a witness to God's Law, convicting people of their sin and guiding them to right behavior, and the gospel is a call to repentance and holiness.

Topics: "Moral Law", "Conscience Guidance"

Description

David Servant preaches about the Law of Moses and the pre-Mosaic Law written on every human heart, holding people accountable and revealing God's displeasure through death. He emphasizes the importance of conscience as God's Law engraved on every person's heart, guiding them to know right from wrong. The sermon highlights examples from Genesis and ancient Egyptian writings, showing how people knew and followed God's Law even before the giving of the Ten Commandments. David Servant warns against searing consciences and the danger of ignoring God's moral principles, urging true Christians to repent, follow their consciences, and maintain blameless conduct.

Transcript

Although the Law of Moses was given to the descendants of Israel sometime around 1440 B.C., God had already given the entire human race another Law that predated the Mosaic Law by at least 2,500 years--a Law that He wrote upon every human heart. To that Law He held every person accountable, and against that Law every person sinned, which is why people died from Adam until Moses. As Paul points out:

So death spread to all men, because all sinned--for until the Law [of Moses] sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses (Rom. 5:12b-14a).

Death is an indication of God's displeasure and judgment. Thus, because people died prior to the Law of Moses, we know God must have been displeased, which means that He must have revealed His Law to everyone prior to Moses, because "sin is not imputed when there is no law" (Rom. 5:13). Because He is righteous, God would never punish people for sin if He hadn't revealed to them His Law.

That pre-Mosaic Law of the conscience is also a post-Mosaic Law. It has been engraved by God on the heart of every person, Jew and Gentile, from the time of Adam until this present moment. Paul wrote that the Gentiles reveal "the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them" (Rom. 2:15).

There is, of course, plenty of additional evidence that God's Law was written on everyone's heart prior to His giving the Mosaic Law. We can read in Genesis of people who lived long before the giving of the Ten Commandments who knew right from wrong. The Egyptian Pharaoh of Abraham's day, for example, knew it was wrong for a man to take another man's wife (see Gen. 14-20). So did Abimelech, a Philistine king (see Gen. 20:1-18, 26:6-11). Jacob knew that deception was wrong (see Gen. 27:12), yet he deceived his father in order to steal from his brother (see Gen. 27:1-45). Judah knew that adultery was wrong (see Gen. 38:24), yet he committed adultery. Joseph also knew that adultery was a sin, but unlike Judah, resisted the temptation (see Gen. 39:7-9). All of these people lived before God gave the Law of Moses. All bear testimony of God's Law written on their hearts, conveyed to them by their consciences.

But did the people who lived before the Mosaic Law know anything more of what God expected than just His prohibition of adultery or lying? Certainly. An inscription on an Egyptian tomb belonging to Harkhuf of Elephantine, a gentleman who lived at least 800 years before God gave the Law of Moses, reads (in part):

"I gave bread to the hungry, clothing to the naked, I ferried him who had no boat....I was one saying good things and repeating what was loved. Never did I say aught evil to a powerful one against anybody. I desired that it might be well with me in the Great God's presence."

Although Harkhuf may not win high marks for humility, the inscription on his tomb reveals that the Law God inscribed on his heart could be summarized, "Love your neighbor as yourself" or, "Treat others as you want to be treated" (Matt. 22:39; Luke 6:31). By listening to his conscience, Harkhuf knew that God expected him to care for the hungry and naked, something that is not even on the spiritual radar of many professing Christians.

As much as two hundred years before Harkhuf, a grand vizier of Egypt named Ptahhotep, who served under Pharaoh Isesi, authored a collection of thirty-seven moral maxims in his old age that were addressed to his son. At least 1,000 years before God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel, Ptahhotep warned his son against both lust and greed. Here are maxims 18 and 19:

If you want friendship to endure

In the house you enter

As master, brother, or friend,

In whatever place you enter,

Beware of approaching the women!

Unhappy is the place where it is done,

Unwelcome is he who intrudes on them.

A thousand men are undone for the enjoyment of a brief moment like a dream,

Then death comes for having known them...

When one goes to do it the heart rejects it. [Note this line!]

He who fails through lust of them,

No affair of his can prosper.
If you want a perfect conduct,
To be free from every evil,
Guard against the vice of greed:
A grievous sickness without cure,
There is no treatment for it.
It embroils fathers, mothers,
And the brothers of the mother,
It parts wife from husband;
It is a compound of all evils,
A bundle of all hateful things.
That man endures whose rule is rightness,
Who walks a straight line;
He will make a will by it,
The greedy has no tomb.

Seared and Sincere Consciences

All people, past and present, regardless of their ethnicity or religion, yield to their consciences to some degree. All have a "line in the sand" that they, at least currently, won't cross over.

The worst scoundrels of human history were those who repeatedly suppressed the inward voice until their consciences became, as Paul wrote, "seared" (1 Timothy 4:12). If you drink hot coffee often enough, eventually it doesn't hurt going down. Likewise, no one begins as a serial murderer or rapist. The downward spiral of such people began by their allowing just a little hatred or lust into their hearts, all at the protest of their consciences.

Entire societies, like ours, are degraded when the people collectively and increasingly allow their consciences to become seared. Their inward thoughts accuse them of wrongdoing, but they justify it with the excuse, "Everyone else is doing it." That is why abortion, for example, the barbaric murder of one's own child, has become commonplace (126,000 abortions every day worldwide, and forty-six million annually). Everyone knows it is morally wrong, but it is legal, so it must be OK. That is also why modern professing Christians can regularly entertain themselves viewing filth on television that self-respecting nonbelievers a few decades ago wouldn't have been caught dead viewing, considering it obscene. The ever-sinking standard of false Christians remains only slightly higher than the ever-sinking standard of nonChristians.

Similarly, the admired heroes of history are those who followed their consciences to a higher degree than their peers. Great moralists like Ghandi come to mind, who said, "Everyone who wills can hear the inner voice. It is within everyone."

Ghandi was right about that. By following his own conscience, Ghandi aroused the conscience of the entire British Empire, and at times he was able to arouse the consciences of everyone in India, stopping Muslims and Hindus from slaughtering each other. Ghandi never became a Christian, but he lived by Christian principles more than many professing Christians, a testimony to the amazing moral potential of an unregenerate person who yields to his conscience. (Keep in mind that it was the British "Christians" who exploited and oppressed the poor Hindus and Muslims of India, which is why Ghandi is also famous for saying, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.")

What is most tragic is that so many professing Christians believe that they can continually ignore their consciences and still go to heaven, just as long as they once prayed a prayer to "accept Jesus." Meanwhile, they also believe that people like Ghandi, whose lives are like shining lights in the darkness in comparison to theirs, will be cast into hell simply because they didn't pray the same little prayer at some point in their lives.

I can't tell you how many times I've had conversations in other countries with people of other faiths who have higher moral principles, and who are listening more closely to their consciences, than many professing Christians. Neither can I tell you how many non-Christian countries I've visited that in some ways are much more moral than the "Christian" countries. The last time I visited Vietnam, for example, the immigration form that everyone on the airplane was given informed us that Vietnam forbids the importation of pornography. In contrast, one-third of all American pastors who responded to a Christianity Today poll admitted to being addicted to internet pornography. Many of the women in their congregations, if they dressed in Vietnam like they dress in church in America, would be assumed to be prostitutes. And we are going to heaven and they are going to hell because we once prayed a little prayer that they haven't prayed?

Please, I beg, don't misquote me. I am not saying that Ghandi went to heaven or that anyone can save himself by his moral effort. I'm only pointing out the absurdity of thinking that one can gain eternal life apart from a real righteousness that is born of repentance and genuine faith. If that is not the case (the Bible, of course, says it is), then God is about as unrighteous as one could be. Imagine God casting Ghandi into hell, while allowing a person who was 1/100th as righteous into heaven only because that person once prayed a prayer to accept Jesus. If such a thing actually happened, we could conclude that God, the giver of our consciences, has no conscience of His own. As I have written so many times before, the grace that God is offering the world through His Son is not a license to sin. Rather, it is a temporary opportunity to repent of sin, be born again, live righteously, and be saved from God's holy wrath.

All of this is to say that true Christians, those who are truly on the narrow road that leads to eternal life, are those who have believed and therefore repented, and from that point onward follow their consciences. When they fail, they repent again in order to clear their consciences. As Paul so plainly wrote,

There shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men (Acts 24:15-16, emphasis added).

Stimulating and Dulling the Conscience

The closest thing to the Law that God has written in our hearts is the Law He has recorded in His written Word. Thus the wisest thing one could do to stimulate his sensitivity to his conscience is to read God's Word. It is like a two-edged sword, cutting to the spirit and soul, "able to judge the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12), just like the conscience.

When God's Word is read or proclaimed, every God-given conscience resonates with it, and it instantly and universally creates conviction. But let me tell you of one of the saddest things I've observed: A preacher who begins his sermon by reading a passage of Scripture that immediately creates conviction across his congregation, but who then follows it with a sermon that serves no other purpose than to free everyone from that conviction--as he explains to them what the Word of God "really means." His sermon is not designed to make his hearers holy, but to make himself a hero--of everyone who wants to continue in his self-deception.

Let me give you a more specific example: A pastor dares to read to his congregation the story of the rich, young ruler. As he reads Jesus' shocking words, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter heaven," conviction naturally grips the hearts of everyone. The rich ruler wanted eternal life. Jesus required him to liquidate possessions and give to the poor. As he walked away sadly, Jesus made His famous statement about the camel and the needle, driving His point home, making it unmistakable. Tension builds as people's consciences begin to accuse them of their own greed and lack of concern for the poor. If their pastor, however, has proven himself in the past to be skilled at nullifying the Word of God, the real suspense revolves around just how he will do it this time. Jesus' words seem so straightforward. How can they possibly mean anything other than what He plainly said?

Yet within the space of thirty minutes, by breaking rules of logic, ignoring biblical context, dredging up some modern myths, adding a dash of cheap humor, and skillfully twisting obvious truth, he is able to pacify everyone who hopes that Jesus' words have no application to them. Once again a blind man has led the blind. The goats smile. The sheep weep. The inward voice has been drowned in a delusion.

But the sad ending of this story is just a precursor to a more tragic conclusion, because everyone must one day stand before the One who wrote His Law on their hearts and give an account. Did I obey God's Law or not? Paul warned, "It is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified" (Rom. 2:13). He learned that from Jesus: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21).

The voice of the conscience is itself a gospel from God, as logic would dictate that if God is convicting me for what I'm doing and not immediately punishing me for it, then He must be offering me a window of opportunity to repent and receive a pardon. How foolish it would be to conclude that God, the giver of my conscience, will grant me a pardon apart from my repentance. My God-given conscience tells me otherwise. That is why the gospel of Scripture is a call to repentance. And that is why the gospel proclaimed without a call to holiness is a grand delusion.

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