

Good or Godly

by Ernest O'Neill

The sermon emphasizes the distinction between being good and being godly, highlighting the role of conscience in guiding us towards a deeper relationship with God.

Scripture: Psalm 139:14

Topics: "Conscience And God", "Spiritual Obedience"

Description

Ernest O'Neill emphasizes that religion is not merely about living morally or being good, but about responding to God's personal concern and signals through our conscience, which is a 'piece of heaven' within us. He explains that our conscience is meant to lead us into a superhuman life of dependence on God, where our will aligns with God's will, rather than following our own opinions. O'Neill warns against the trap of moral self-righteousness and independence from God, stressing the importance of obeying our conscience to experience true spiritual life and escape spiritual death.

Transcript

Many of us think of religion as morality. We think that "being religious" just means "being good" or "being a moral person". We slip into this error because we read a Biblical statement like "God whom I serve with a clear conscience" (2 Timothy 1:3), and we identify "conscience" as the faculty that reprovved us when we told a lie. We think, therefore, that religion is living with a clear conscience, i.e. living morally. The result of this popular idea of religion has been to produce thousands of boring "moral" people who have none of the daring abandon and exciting initiative of Francis of Assisi or Eric Little. They often express, instead, the death-urge of "Christianity-gone-sour" -the ethical standards without the vital life-urge of Jesus' Spirit.

Conscience Does Not Care About Goodness

Truthfully-conscience does not draw you simply to what is good or moral in human eyes. Conscience is part of the indestructible image of God in you-it is a "piece of heaven". It not only urges you to live up to the best that you know-as an Englishman or a cannibal--but it registers God's own personal concern about your responses to His signals. Our Creator is always-every moment-trying to get through to us. He is constantly endeavouring to alert us to the fact that we are only half-living! The English poet, Auden, described this half-life/half-death in these words:

"In headaches and in worry,

Vaguely life leaks away."

Night and day, our maker nudges us to see that there is a beautiful life of grace and gladness that begins the moment we believe that He is our loving Father who "feeds the birds of the air" and regards us as "of much more value than them". Conscience is part of our "spirit", the faculty through which we can perceive God-it, therefore, makes us aware-or convicts us-when we are not responding to God's hints. Thus God strives to reveal to us where we are subtly living in unreality-as if He didn't exist. He does this through our consciences.

Your Will and Your Conscience

The purpose, then, of your conscience is not to enable you to live a morally good life. It certainly results in that, but its primary purpose is to conduct you into superhuman life-where you actually depend on God in your deep heart. Conscience is quickened by God's Spirit each time your will obeys it. It cannot be otherwise. The Creator has connected the two faculties together in this way so that you may be conformed to the image of his Son. When you actually exercise your will over your mind, emotions and body according to the whispers of conscience, you are enabled to discern God's will more and more clearly.

What many of us do is to exercise our will according to the opinions we hold in our minds; we ignore the pure signals of our conscience. The result is that we reform our behaviour in accordance with the best moral standards our mind grasps. But our spirit-and therefore our dependence on God-is affected only adversely. We plough further down the road to the moral self-righteousness of the Pharisees-"dead in our sin" and independence of god, though we seem more religious than ever.

Escape From Death

The only way to escape from this vicious circle of death-life in which so many of us live is for our wills to follow out after our consciences. "Cold-turkey" exercise of the will in precise accordance with the whispers of conscience is the only way into freshness of superhuman life. Only in this way can our spirits come alive to Our Maker. Your will must become a slave to your conscience (enlightened by the Bible). Only this incipient trusting of God's Spirit in your conscience can lead you out of the self-interested second-guessing of your mind. God's Spirit does not respond to the mind's opinions or machinations; God's Spirit responds only to the practical exercise of the will. Jesus said, "If you do the will of my Father, you will know that what I say is true." Your weak, dead, comatose spirit will begin to live only when your will obeys your conscience. Meditations, self-denial, good works cannot be substituted for this. The pivotal point of your whole personality is at the meeting-place of these two faculties-your conscience and your will. Here you will be led beyond goodness to God, where independent moral goodness is impossible.

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