

On Conscience

by John Wesley

The sermon explores the nature and importance of conscience, and provides directions for preserving a tender conscience.

Scripture: Job 16:19, Psalm 139:23-24, Micah 6:8, Matthew 5:8, Acts 24:16, Romans 9:1, 2 Corinthians 1:12, 1 Timothy 1:5, Hebrews 10:22, 1 John 2:20

Topics: "Conscience", "Moral Guidance"

Description

John Wesley's sermon 'On Conscience' emphasizes the critical role of conscience in guiding moral behavior and understanding right from wrong. He explains that conscience is a divine gift that allows individuals to discern their actions in relation to God's will, serving as both a witness and a judge. Wesley categorizes different types of conscience, including good, tender, scrupulous, and hardened, and stresses the importance of obeying one's conscience to maintain its sensitivity. He concludes with practical directions for nurturing a good conscience, urging believers to live in constant awareness of God's presence and to align their actions with His word.

Transcript

"For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience." 2 Cor. 1:12.

1. How few words are there in the world more common than this, Conscience! It is in almost every one's mouth. And one would thence be apt to conclude, that no word can be found which is more generally understood. But it may be doubted whether this is the case or no; although numberless treatises have been written upon it. For it is certain, a great part of those writers have rather puzzled the cause than cleared it; that they have usually "darkened counsel by uttering words without knowledge."

2. The best treatise on the subject which I remember to have seen is translated from the French of Mons. Placette, which describes in a clear and rational manner the nature and offices of conscience. But though it was published near a hundred years ago, it is in very few hands; and indeed a great part of those that have read it complain of the length of it. An octavo volume of several hundred pages, upon so plain a subject, was likely to prove a trial of patience to most persons of understanding. It seems, therefore, there is still wanting a discourse upon the subject, short, as well as clear. This, by the assistance of God, I will endeavor to supply, by showing, First, the nature of conscience; and, Then, the several sorts of it; after which, I shall conclude with a few important directions.

I. 1. And, First, I am to show the nature of conscience. This a very pious man in the last century (in his sermon on Universal Conscientiousness) describes in the following manner: -- "This word, which literally signifies, knowing with another, excellently sets forth the scriptural motion of it. So Job: (16:19:) 'My witness is in heaven.' And so the Apostle: (Rom. 9:1:) 'I say the truth; my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost.' In both place it is as if he had said, 'God witnesseth with my conscience. Conscience is placed in the middle, under God, and above man. It is a kind of silent reasoning of the mind, whereby those things which are judged to be right are approved of with pleasure; but those which are judged evil are disapproved of with uneasiness.'" This is a tribunal in the breast of men, to accuse sinners, and excuse them that do well.

2. To view it in a somewhat different light: Conscience, as well as the Latin word from which it is taken, and the Greek word, *_syneidesis_*, necessarily imply, the knowledge of two or more things together: Suppose the knowledge of our words and actions, and at the same time of their goodness or badness; if it be not rather the faculty whereby we know at once our actions and the quality of them.

3. Conscience, then, is that faculty whereby we are at once conscience of our own thoughts, words, and actions; and of their merit or demerit, of their being good or bad; and, consequently, deserving either praise or censure. And some pleasure generally attends the former sentence; some uneasiness the latter: But this varies exceedingly, according to education and a thousand other circumstances.

4. Can it be denied that something of this is found in every man born into the world? And does it not appear as soon as the understanding opens, as soon as reason begins to dawn? Does not every one then begin to know that there is a difference between good and evil; how imperfect soever the various circumstances of this sense of good and evil may be? Does not every man, for instance, know, unless blinded by the prejudices of education, (like the inhabitants of the Cape of Good Hope,) that it is good to honour his parents? Do not all men, however uneducated or barbarous, allow, it is right to do to others as we would have them do to us? And are not all who know this condemned in their own mind when they do anything contrary thereto? as, on the other hand, when they act suitable thereto, they have the approbation of their own conscience?

5. This faculty seems to be what is usually meant by those who speak of natural conscience; an expression frequently found in some of our best authors, but yet not strictly just. For though in one sense it may be termed natural, because it is found in all men; yet, properly speaking, it is not natural, but a supernatural gift of God, above all his natural endowments No; it is not nature, but the Son of God, that is "the true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world." So that we may say to every human creature, "He," not nature, "hath showed thee, O man, what is good." And it is his Spirit who giveth thee an inward check, who causeth thee to feel uneasy, when thou walkest in any instance contrary to the light which he hath given thee.

6. It may give a peculiar force to that beautiful passage to consider by whom and on what occasion the words were uttered. The persons speaking are Balak the King of Moab; and Balaam, then under divine impressions (it seems, then "not far from the kingdom of God, "although he afterwards so foully revolted): Probably Balak too, at that time, experienced something of the same influence. This occasioned his consulting with, or asking counsel of, Balaam, -- his proposing the question to which Balaam gives so full an answer: (Micah 6:5ff. :) "O my people," saith the Prophet in the name of God, "remember what Balak the King of Moab consulted," (it seems, in the fullness of his heart,) "and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him. Wherewith," saith he, "shall I come before the Lord, and Bow myself before the high God?"

Shall I come before him with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression? the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (This the kings of Moab had actually done, on occasions of deep distress; a remarkable account of which is recorded in the third chapter of the Second Book of Kings.) To this Balaam makes that noble reply, (being, doubtless, then taught of God,) "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

7. To take a more distinct view of conscience, it appears to have a threefold office: First. It is a witness, -- testifying what we have done, in thought, or word, or action. Secondly. It is a judge, -- passing sentence on what we have done, that it is good or evil. And, Thirdly, it, in some sort, executes the sentence, by occasioning a degree of complacency in him that does well, and a degree of uneasiness in him that does evil.

8. Professor Hutcheson, late of Glasgow, places conscience in a different light. In his Essay on the Passions," he observes, that we have several senses, or natural avenues of pleasure and pain, besides the five external senses. One of these he terms the public sense; whereby we are naturally pained at the misery of a fellow-creature, and pleased at his deliverance from it. And every man, says he, has a moral sense; whereby he approves of benevolence and disapproves of cruelty. Yea, he is uneasy when he himself has done a cruel action, and pleased when he has done a generous one.

9. All this is, in some sense, undoubtedly true. But it is not true, that either the public or the moral sense (both of which are included in the term conscience) is now natural to man. Whatever may have been the case at first, while man was in a state of innocence, both the one and the other is now a branch of that supernatural gift of God which we usually style, preventing grace. But the Professor does not at all agree with this. He sets God wholly out of the question. God has nothing to do with his scheme of virtue, from the beginning to the end. So that, to say the truth, his scheme of virtue is Atheism all over. This is refinement indeed! Many have excluded God out of the World: He excludes him even out of religion!

10. But do we not mistake him? Do we take his meaning right? That it may be plain enough, that no man may mistake him, he proposes this question: "What, if a man in doing a virtuous, that is, a generous action, in helping a fellow-creature, has an eye to God, either as commanding, or as promising to reward it? Then," says he, "so far as he has an eye to God, the virtue of the action is lost. Whatever actions spring from an eye to the recompense of reward have no virtue, no moral goodness, in them." Alas! was this man called a Christian? How unjustly was he slandered with that assertion! Even Dr. Taylor, though he does not allow Christ to be God, yet does not scruple to term him, "A person of consummate virtue." But the Professor cannot allow him any virtue at all!

11. But to return. What is conscience, in the Christian sense? It is that faculty of the soul which, by the assistance of the grace of God, sees at one and the same time, (1.) Our own tempers and lives, -- the real nature and quality of our thoughts, words, and actions; (2.) The rule whereby we are to be directed; and, (3.) The agreement or disagreement therewith. To express this a little more largely: Conscience implies, First, the faculty a man has of knowing himself; of discerning, both in general and in particular, his own tempers, thoughts, words, and actions. But this it is not possible for him to do, without the assistance of the Spirit of God. Otherwise, self-love, and, indeed, every other irregular passion, would disguise and wholly conceal him from himself. It implies, Secondly, a knowledge of the rule whereby he is to be directed in every particular; which is no other than the written word of God. Conscience implies, Thirdly, a knowledge that all his thoughts, and words, and actions are conformable to that rule. In all the offices of

conscience, the "unction of the Holy One" is indispensably needful. Without this, neither could we clearly discern our lives or tempers; nor could we judge of the rule whereby we are to walk, or of our conformity of disconformity to it.

12. This is properly the account of a good conscience; which may be in other terms expressed thus: A divine consciousness of walking in all things according to the written word of God. It seems, indeed, that there can be no conscience which has not a regard to God. If you say, "Yes, there certainly may be a consciousness of having done right or wrong, without any reference to him;" I answer, This I cannot grant: I doubt whether the very words, right and wrong, according to the Christian system, do not imply, in the very idea of them, agreement and disagreement to the will and word of God. If so, there is no such thing as conscience in a Christian, if we leave God out of the question.

13. In order to the very existence of a good conscience, as well as to the continuance of it, the continued influence of the Spirit of God is absolutely needful. Accordingly, the Apostle John declares to the believers of all ages, "Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things:" All things that are needful to your having a "conscience void of offence toward God and toward man." So he adds, "Ye have no need that any one should teach you," otherwise "than as that anointing teacheth you." That anointing clearly teacheth us those three things, -- First, the true meaning of God's word; Secondly, our actions, to remembrance; and, Thirdly, the agreement of all with the commandments of God.

14. Proceed we now to consider, in the Second place, the several sorts of conscience. A good conscience has been spoken of already. This ST. Paul expresses various ways. In one place he simply terms it, a "good conscience toward God;" in another, "a conscience void of offence toward God and toward man." But he speaks still more largely in the text: "Our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity," with a single eye, "and godly sincerity, we have had our conversation in the world." Meantime he observes, that this was done, "not by fleshly wisdom," -- commonly called prudence, -- (this never did, nor ever can produce such an effect,) "but by the grace of God;" which alone is sufficient to work this in any child of man.

15. Nearly allied to this (if it be not the same placed in another view, or a particular branch of it) is a tender conscience. One of a tender conscience is exact in observing any deviation from the word of God, whether in thought, or word, or work; and immediately feels remorse and self-condemnation for it. And the constant cry of his soul is,

O that my tender soul may fly

The first abhorr'd approach of ill,

Quick as the apple of an eye

The slightest touch of sin to feel!

16. But sometimes this excellent quality, tenderness of conscience, is carried to an extreme. We find some who fear where no fear is; who are continually condemning themselves without cause; imagining some things to be sinful, which the Scripture nowhere condemns; and supposing other things to be their duty, which the Scripture nowhere enjoins. This is properly termed a scrupulous conscience, and is a sore evil. It is highly expedient to yield to it as little as possible; rather it is a matter of earnest prayer, that you may be delivered from this sore evil, and may recover a sound mind; to which nothing would contribute more,

than the converse of a pious and judicious friend.

17. But the extreme which is opposite to this is far more dangerous. A hardened conscience is a thousand times more dangerous than a scrupulous one: That can violate a plain command of God, without any self-condemnation; either doing what he has expressly forbidden, or neglecting what he has expressly commanded; and yet without any remorse; yea, perhaps glorying in this very hardness of heart! Many instances of this deplorable stupidity we meet with at this day; and even among people that suppose themselves to have no small share of religion. A person is doing something which the Scripture clearly forbids. You ask, "How do you dare to do this?" and are answered with perfect unconcern, "O, my heart does not condemn me." I reply, "So much the worse. I would to God it did! You would then be in a safer state than you are now. It is a dreadful thing to be condemned by the word of God, and yet not to be condemned by your own heart!" If we can break the least of the known commands of God, without any self-condemnation, it is plain that the god of this world hath hardened our hearts. If we do not soon recover from this, we shall be "past feeling," and our consciences (as St. Paul speaks) will be "seared as with a hot iron."

18. I have now only to add a few important directions. The first great point is this: Suppose we have a tender conscience, how shall we preserve it? I believe there is only one possible way of doing this, which is, to obey it. Every act of disobedience tends to blind and deaden it; to put out its eyes, that it may not see the good and the acceptable will of God; and to deaden the heart, that it may not feel self-condemnation when we act in opposition to it. And, in the contrary, every act of obedience gives to the conscience a sharper and stronger sight, and a quicker feeling of whatever offends the glorious majesty of God. Therefore, if you desire to have your conscience always quick to discern, and faithful to accuse or excuse you, if you would preserve it always sensible and tender, be sure to obey it at all events; continually listen to its admonitions, and steadily follow them. Whatever it directs you to do, according to the word of God, do; however grievous to flesh and blood. Whatever it forbids, if the prohibition be grounded on the word of God, see you do it not; however pleasing it may be to flesh and blood. The one or the other may frequently be the case. What God forbids may be pleasing to our evil nature: There you are called to deny yourself, or you deny your Master. What he enjoins may be painful to nature: There take up your cross. So true is our Lord's word: "Except a man deny himself, and take up his cross daily, he cannot be my disciple."

19. I cannot conclude this discourse better, than with an extract from Dr. Annesley's sermon on "Universal Conscientiousness." [Dr. Annesley (my mother's father) was Rector of the parish of Cripplegate.]

"Be persuaded to practise the following directions, and your conscience will continue right: --

1. "Take heed of every sin; count no sin small; and obey every command with your might. Watch against the first risings of sin, and beware of the borders of sin. Shun the very appearance of evil. Venture not upon temptation or occasions of sin.

2. "Consider yourself as living under God's eye: Live as in the sensible presence of the jealous God. Remember, all things are naked and open before him! You cannot deceive him; for he is infinite wisdom: You cannot fly from him; for he is every where: You cannot bribe him; for he is righteousness itself! Speak as knowing God hears you: Walk as knowing God besets you on every side. The Lord is with you while you are with him; that is, you shall enjoy his favourable presence while you live in his awful presence.

3. "Be serious and frequent in the examination of your heart and life. There are some duties like those parts of the body, the want of which may be supplied by other parts; but the want of these nothing can

supply. Every evening review you carriage through the day; what you have done or thought that was unbecoming you character; whether you heart has been instant upon religion, and indifferent to the world. Have a special care of two portion of time; namely, morning and evening; the morning to forethink what you have to do, and the evening to examine whether you have done what you ought.

4. "Let every action have reference to your whole life, and not to a part only. Let all your subordinate ends be suitable to the great end of your living. 'Exercise yourself unto godliness.' Be as diligent in religion, as thou wouldest have thy children that go to school be in learning. Let they whole life be a preparation for heaven, like the preparation of wrestlers for the combat.

5. "Do not venture on sin because Christ hath purchased a pardon; that is a most horrible abuse of Christ. For this very reason there was no sacrifice under the law for any wilful sin; lest people should think they know the price of sins, as those do who deal in Popish indulgences.

6. "Be nothing in your own eyes: For what is it, alas! that we have to be proud of? Our very conception was sinful, our birth painful, our life toilsome, our death we know not what! But all this is nothing to the state of our soul. If we know this, what excuse have we for pride?

7. "Consult duty, not events. We have nothing to do but to mind our duty. All speculations that tend not to holiness are among your superfluities; but forebodings of what may befall you in doing your duty may be reckoned among your sins; and to venture upon sin to avoid danger is to sink the ship for fear of pirates. O how quiet, as well as holy, would our lives be, had we learned that single lesson, -- to be careful for nothing, but to do our duty, and leave all consequences to God! What madness for silly dust to prescribe to infinite wisdom! to let go our work, and meddle with God's! He hath managed the concerns of the world, and of every individual person in it, without giving cause of complaint to any, for above these five thousand years. And does he now need your counsel? Nay, it is your business to mind your own duty.

8. "What advice you would give another, take yourself: The worst of men are apt enough to lay burdens on others, which if they would take on themselves they would be rare Christians.

9. "Do nothing on which you cannot pray for a blessing. Every action of a Christian that is good, is sanctified by the word and prayer. It becomes not a Christian to do anything so trivial, that he cannot pray over it. And if he would but bestow a serious ejaculation on every occurrent action, such a prayer would cut off all things sinful, and encourage all things lawful.

10. "Think, and speak, and do what you are persuaded Christ himself would do in your case, were he on earth. It becomes a Christian, rather to be an example to all, who was, and is, and ever will be, our absolute pattern. O Christians, how did Christ pray, and redeem time for prayer! How did Christ preach, out of whose mouth proceeded no other but gracious words? What time did Christ spend in impertinent discourse? How did Christ go up and down, doing good to men, and what was pleasing to God? Beloved, I commend to you these four memorials: (1.) Mind duty: (2.) What is the duty of another in your case, is your own: (3.) Do not meddle with anything, if you cannot say, The blessing of the Lord be upon it: (4.) Above all, sooner forget your Christian name, than forget to eye Christ! Whatever treatment you meet with from the world, remember him and follow his steps, 'who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who when he was reviled, reviled not again; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.'"

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