

INTRODUCTION

This is the penultimate message in this series on spurious Bible verses. Next week, we'll consider the final adage, "To Thine Own Self Be True." I encourage you to investigate this week and see if you can find the true source of that saying.

A helicopter pilot flying over Seattle got lost in the dense fog. The pilot emerged from the fog and had no idea where he was. He saw a tall building nearby with people working, so he hovered the helicopter near one of the windows and held up a sign asking "Where am I?" One of the workers wrote a response and held up a sign that said, "You are in a helicopter." The pilot nodded his thanks and flew straight to the airport. One of the passengers was curious and asked, "How could that sign 'You are in a helicopter' help you know where you were?" The pilot said, "Simple. The answer that guy gave me was technically correct, but completely useless, so I figured that must be the Microsoft Customer Relations Building, so I knew where I was!"

Many Americans are circling around in a moral fog, with no idea which direction to go. Most of the moral advice you find in magazines or hear on talk-shows only creates more confusion. How can you know right from wrong? How about this advice: "Let your conscience be your guide." No, that's NOT in the Bible. Do you know the original source the saying? Most people think it comes from the 1940 Disney movie "Pinocchio." In it, Jiminy Cricket sang a song to Pinocchio in which he said, "Take the strait and narrow path; and if you start to slide—give a little whistle, give a little whistle and always let your conscience be your guide."

That's where many of us heard it first, but that saying had been around a long time when Jiminy Cricket sang it in 1940. Actually, it originated as an Islamic saying 1,300 years ago. Caliph Umar Ibn Al-khattab was the father of one of Mohammed's wives and was the third Muslim Caliph. After conquering Jerusalem he was returning to Medina and he prayed and gave a message at Jabiah. One of the things Al-Khattab said was: "And speak the truth. Do not hesitate to say what you consider to be the truth. Say what you feel. Let your conscience be your guide."

Can you let your conscience be your guide? Yes and no. Yes, when you are very young, you should pay attention to your conscience, but as you grow older, we're going to see that it is actually a very dangerous thing to let your conscience be your guide. Consider three important spiritual principles concerning conscience:

1. YOUR CONSCIENCE WAS FORMED BY GOD

Each person is born with a conscience. It's like a candle burning in the inner depths of your heart telling you the difference between right and wrong. Your conscience is described as a candle or lamp in Proverbs 20:27. The Bible says, "The spirit of a man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all the inner depths of his heart." This moral searchlight is given by God to every person on the planet. Almost all societies have rules against killing and stealing. Where did they get that idea? It came from our God-given conscience.

Our English word "conscience" comes from two Latin words, *con*, which means "with" and *science* which means "to know." The New Testament word is *suneidesis* which means "to know

together." Both words have the idea of "knowing with ourselves" or "knowing within ourselves." When it comes to moral decisions, it means to "understand internally."

When Adam and Eve sinned, they felt guilty about what they had done. They suddenly realized they were naked, and the first thing they wanted to do was to cover their nakedness. How did they know that? Their consciences were operating. Not only did they try to hide their nakedness, when God came to talk with them, they tried to hide from God. Why? Because their conscience made them feel guilty. In Genesis 4, Cain was so angry at his brother Abel that he killed him. Although this was long before the Ten Commandments ever stated, "You shall not murder," Cain *knew* instinctively what he had done was wrong. Your conscience is to your soul what your nerves are to your body. When your finger touches something hot, the nerves send a warning message to the brain: THAT'S HOT! REMOVE THE FINGER! The brain sends a message to the muscles in the arm to withdraw the finger. Past experiences also allow us warn others. Because parents know that fire can burn, they can say, "Children, stay away from the fire or you'll get burned."

The same is true of the conscience. Your conscience is like a warning light telling you what you are contemplating doing is wrong—and if you do it, your conscience says, "See I told you not to do that."

Even secular experts recognize the existence of a human conscience. Dr. Marvin W. Berkowitz, an expert on moral development writes: "Kids have an internal conscience. It starts developing in the first few years of life and really kicks into high gear around 3 or 4 years of age. Our consciences tell us when we are about to violate (or have violated) our moral code. You can see this even in pre-schoolers who cry at their own selfishness and who try to soothe those they have hurt." (Sanford N. McDonnell Professor of Character Education; University of Missouri-St. Louis)

Even without being taught a moral law, people are born with a sense of what is right and wrong. The Bible teaches that God provided two solid proofs that point to His existence. The first is an external witness—creation. When you understand the amazing complexity and order of the Universe in which we live, you are driven to admit there is a higher intelligence that designed all this and created it.

The other witness to the existence of God is an internal witness—conscience. The fact that we are born with this moral equipment called conscience should prove there is Someone who determines the rightness and wrongness of actions. You don't have to read a written law to know that stealing, killing, and lying are wrong; that's something everyone instinctively knows.

Romans 2:14-15 says, "Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them."

Just as a compass points to magnetic north, we are born with a moral conscience that points to right and wrong. Your conscience doesn't *make* you do right, or wrong, it just lets you know

when you are about to do wrong, and it makes you suffer when you have done wrong. Conscience is like the yellow line on a two lane highway. When there is a yellow line, you know that it's not safe to pass the car in front of you. The yellow line doesn't keep you from passing that car; it just tells you that you shouldn't.

2. YOUR CONSCIENCE CAN BE DEFORMED BY SIN

When a person continually ignores the dictates of his conscience, the conscience can become faulty. You can take a perfectly good compass that is pointing north, and you can hold a magnet next to the compass, and the needle will rotate and no longer be a reliable guide. The same thing happens to your conscience when you expose it to repeated sin—it no longer is a reliable guide. Your conscience doesn't become ruined instantly, it happens gradually.

Step One: Moral guidance is distorted

The first thing that happens is your sense of right and wrong becomes distorted. Your conscience is like a triangle that operates within your soul. It has three sharp corners, and when you are considering doing something wrong, the three corners stab you on the inside. However, every time you ignore or deny your conscience it's like filing down the sharp edges of that triangle. The next time you are confronted with the same opportunity to do wrong, your conscience stabs you again, but this time the jab is not as sharp. Over time, as you continually resist the dictates of your conscience the sharp edges are worn down until you seldom feel them. Instead of being a triangle, it's as if your conscience has become a moral beach ball bouncing around inside your soul.

The Bible says, "To those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted. They claim to know God, but by their actions, they deny him." (Titus 1:15-16)

Have you ever told a lie? The first time you told a lie, you felt badly about it. But the next time you told it, the lie came a little easier. We have all known people who were so good at lying, they could look you right in the eye and lie without any sign of moral compunction or remorse. They have convinced themselves that telling a little lie is actually not so bad.

In 2001, George O'Leary was hired as head football coach for Notre Dame, the job he had always dreamed about having. Five days later, he was fired when it was discovered he lied about his background. He claimed to have received a Masters degree and to have lettered in football three years at New Hampshire. He had neither. Early in his coaching career he fabricated these lies and as the years passed he found it easier and easier to repeat the claims, until someone at Notre Dame checked!

Step Two: Moral guidance is deadened

The reason you can't just let your conscience be your guide is because not only can your conscience become distorted and dull, it can actually become deadened. A person can commit sin so often over a period of time, his conscience can basically die. The Bible makes this possibility

clear in 1 Timothy 4:1-2, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared (Greek: *kauteriazō*) as with a hot iron."

When I was teenager, I had a friend who suffered a terrible burn on his arm as a child. There was a terrible scar there, and he used to brag about how tough he was by sticking the end of his pocketknife into the scar, or even putting a lit cigarette against it without burning. Of course, he could do that because all the nerve endings were cauterized, burned. He didn't have any sensitivity there. The Bible says the same thing can happen to a person morally. Someone can ignore their conscience so long until it becomes completely desensitized to conviction. That's a terrible place to be. Someone once said the worst sin is consciousness of no sin!

You wonder how the Nazi prison guards could participate in the wholesale slaughter of Jewish prisoners during WWII? Their consciences had become so deadened some of them thought they were doing the world a favor by killing Jews.

You wonder how a serial killer like Ted Bundy could smile and carry on a life that seemed outwardly normal when he brutally killed at least 36 women? Psychiatrists have a term for them: psychopaths. Basically, their moral restraint has disappeared. Their consciences have been seared with a hot iron. Sigmund Freud described this as "an iron curtain that is constructed between the ego and the id...and 'repression' is said to be in force. Neurosis occurs when the id breaks through the wall and overwhelms the ego." (John Drakeford, *Integrity Therapy*, p. 29)

But you don't have to be a criminal psychopath to have your conscience deadened. I've known men who claimed to be Christians who could carry on an adulterous relationship and say they didn't *feel* any guilt about it. Some people have cheated on their income tax for so long they have convinced themselves there is nothing wrong with it. The main reason you should never live by your feelings is because, like your conscience, your feelings can be dead wrong.

3. YOUR CONSCIENCE MUST BE TRANSFORMED BY JESUS

If you could spend your entire life listening to and obeying your God-given conscience, you could live a perfect life. But the Bible says we have ALL sinned and we fall short of the glory of God. Have you ever told a lie? Have you ever cheated or stolen? Have you ever deliberately hurt someone? That's why all of us end up with a messed-up conscience.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens was best known by his pen-name, Mark Twain. He struggled personally with his own guilty conscience, and he addressed the topic in many of his writings. He wrote: "An uneasy conscience is a hair in the mouth. I would trade mine for the small-pox and seven kinds of consumption, and be glad of the chance." (Samuel Clemens, *Notebook*, 1904) In the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, this struggle with conscience was expressed by Huck: "If I had a yaller dog that didn't know no more than a person's conscience does I would pison him. It takes up more room than all the rest of a person's insides, and yet ain't no good, nohow." (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, chapter 33) Notice he said the conscience "takes up more room than all the rest of a person's insides." When you have a guilty conscience, it seems as if it is hard to ignore, but that's a good sign. It shows your conscience hasn't been completely deadened.

What do you do when you have a guilty conscience? The Bible answers that question in Hebrews 10:22: "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience."

The Bible teaches a guilty conscience is a dirty conscience. It's like moral filth that you allow to accumulate that pollutes your soul. And when your conscience becomes dirty, it affects the way you look at others. Once there was an old woman who sat in her home and watched her neighbors with a critical eye. She commented to her family who visited that her neighbor's car was always dirty. She complained that the neighbor's children wore dirty clothes, and that the neighbor's house was so dirty it needed a new coat of paint. One day she was repeating her criticism to her daughter of how dirty her neighbors were. The daughter got up and walked over to her mother's window and discovered the window itself was filthy. When she cleaned one of the windows for her mother, it was clear the neighbor's house, car, and clothes were clean—the problem was her mother's dirty windows. That's what a dirty conscience can do; it not only affects the way we look at ourselves, it affects the way we look at others. Jesus can do two important things for a deformed, dirty conscience:

(1) Your conscience must be cleansed by His blood

When people have a guilty conscience they do all kinds of things to get rid of their guilt. In certain areas around the world people crawl on their hands and knees up steep mountains to reach a church or altar. They think these painful acts of penitence will absolve them of their guilt. Other people throw themselves into religious activity trying to get rid of their guilt. But the Bible teaches that there is only one thing that can clean a dirty conscience—the Blood of Jesus Christ. The Bible says, "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God. (Hebrews 9:14)

In Hebrews 9, the writer emphasizes that the blood of all the goats and bulls sacrificed over the years was not able to forgive a guilty conscience. But when Jesus, the perfect Lamb of God died on the cross, His blood alone can cleanse our dirty consciences. The reason we need a clean conscience is because we are all guilty of acts that lead to death, not merely physical death, but eternal separation from God. Salvation consists of coming to God and admitting you are guilty, you have a dirty conscience. It is asking God to cleanse you of your sinfulness. It is accepting by faith that you *have* been cleansed by His blood.

We all need to ask ourselves the question posed by the hymn writer Elisha Hoffman: "Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb? Are you fully trusting in His grace this hour? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb? Are you washed in the blood? In the soul-cleansing blood of the Lamb? Are your garments spotless, are they white as snow? Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?"

(2) Your conscience must be corrected by His Word

I once read a story of a man who worked in a small town factory. One of his jobs was to blow the factory whistle every day at 7, 12 and 4. Every morning on the way to work, he stopped and set his pocket watch by a large clock sitting in the window of a local jewelry store. Then he would know when to blow the whistle. After doing this for years, he happened to visit the jewelry store on the weekend. He asked the owner how the clock in the shop window kept such perfect time. The owner said, "Oh, I set that clock every day by the factory whistle."

Your conscience is like a clock: If you set it to the wrong time, it will *keep* the wrong time, and it will be unreliable. But if you set it to the right time, it should be dependable. When you become a Christian, you "set" your conscience to the Bible—Word of God. We read in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." God's Word always points you to Jesus and He becomes your standard for right and wrong.

When you become a follower of Jesus Christ, your determination of right and wrong is no longer dependent on your conscience because you know you *can't* let your conscience be your guide. You don't decide what is right or wrong by how you feel, because you have learned feelings can be unreliable. Your standard for morality is NOT what the majority of other people think, because most people think it's okay to tell a lie every now and then.

I've been flying airplanes since 1975, and every airplane has a magnetic compass. You can't depend on the magnetic compass unless you are flying straight and level because whenever you are climbing, descending, or turning, the compass doesn't work properly. So every airplane has a gyroscopic compass called a "directional gyro" or a "DG" for short. This instrument is driven by a small gyroscope which maintains equilibrium even when the airplane is turning or climbing. But the DG is not a real compass, it must be *set* to match the magnetic compass, and it has to be reset frequently or it will not reflect the correct heading. Even so, as followers of Jesus, we must be constantly and continually recalibrating our consciences to the Word of God.

CONCLUSION

The Bible will guide you into an understanding of what is right and wrong, and it can also guide you into heaven. I recently read a true story about a teenage girl in Columbia who was given a Spanish New Testament. She read the New Testament until one day her father caught her reading it... and told her not to read it any more because it was full of lies and fantasy. But the girl kept on reading until one day her father came home unexpectedly found her with the New Testament grabbed it from her hands and shoved it into his briefcase. The father went off to work where he was a mining engineer. Several hours later there was a muffled explosion then the sound of sirens. There had been a cave-in at the mine. The father was trapped in the mine along with 30 other workers. The rescue workers took 5 days to finally reach the men, but it was too late. All 31 men died including the father of this little girl. Curiously, workers found the man clutching the New Testament between his praying hands. When they opened the front cover they found a note: "To my daughter Keep reading this New Testament, it is true and right, and I will see you one day in heaven." Then they turned to the back page where the father had signed the commitment card after having said the sinner's prayer. But that was not the end of the story. Turning the page there were signed the names of the other 30 workers. Let your conscience be

your guide? Heaven forbid! Let God's Word illuminated by God's Spirit be your guide!

OUTLINE

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes