

Conscience

In South Africa, we are used to sirens. We hear police and ambulance sirens often enough. Many of us have security alarms in our homes, with sirens that go off when the alarm is tripped. Sirens are there to alert us of something that is wrong.

God has placed something similar inside each of us. It is what the Bible calls conscience.

What you do with that alarm system of your soul will have very important effects on your relationship with God, and even your relationship to other people.

I would like us to study from the Scripture what the conscience is and what it does; how it is shaped, why it is so important, and how it is cleared.

I. What the Conscience Is

What is the conscience? The conscience is that part of the soul God has given you which does two things. First it watches all your actions at all times and in all places. It witnesses not only what you do (and fail to do); it witnesses what you think, what you desire, what you wish. It watches and witnesses.

The second thing it does, depending on the action or thought, is afflict you. It punishes you. It disturbs you.

Romans 2:15 *who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them)*

Conscience is like an alarm system connected to motion sensors. Those motion sensors send out beams of light, and if you cross them, it triggers the alarm. Conscience is like that, except it is not located in just one place. It goes with you everywhere. And it watches every word, thought and deed, and when you do wrong, at least in the eyes of your conscience, it sounds the alarm.

What does that alarm feel like? It is an inward pain. It is the sense of shame, of guilt, of wrongdoing. It is as if someone is pointing a finger at us from within. Someone has blown the whistle on us. There is a siren going off inside saying, "Guilty, guilty, guilty".

You see examples of this in the Bible again and again. The very first sin - Adam and Eve hid from God. Why did they hide? They hid because their conscience convicted them.

Psalms 32:3-4 *When I kept silent, my bones grew old Through my groaning all the day long. ⁴ For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. Selah*

You might remember the incident where some men brought an adulteress to Jesus, and He said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw the first stone." The Bible goes on to say,

John 8:9 Then those who heard *it*, being convicted by *their* conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest *even* to the last.

Now, not only believers have a conscience. Unbelievers have a conscience too. The passage in Romans shows us that even the man in the jungle, having never seen a Bible, never heard the name of Jesus, never heard the Gospel, has a conscience. He has a moral judge in his own soul.

From when children can understand very little language, they show evidence of a conscience. It is really a gift from God, to live Himself a witness in the soul of every human, so that even when exposure to His Word is limited, there is enough moral light in the human soul to know some right

from wrong.

Proverbs 20:27 *The spirit of a man is the lamp of the LORD, Searching all the inner depths of his heart.*

The conscience is a watcher and an afflicter.

II. The Adjustment of the Conscience

Now here is where we need to understand something very important about the conscience. The conscience is not perfect. By itself, conscience is not enough. The conscience can make mistakes. The conscience is in fact only as good as the knowledge to which it has been exposed.

You see, conscience is literally 'with-knowledge'. It is the knowledge of good and evil you gain from various sources that exist together with you, and which you carry around.

So how reliable is your conscience? As reliable as the knowledge of good and evil you have received.

You learn about good and evil from many sources – from your parents and family, from childhood friends, from school and schoolteachers, from the culture around you and its various media, from the religion you grew up with, even from your own habits. Those have combined to shape the thinking of that little judge who sits in your heart. And if the information they gave you is not in accord with God's Word, your conscience is going to be off.

I once had a compass that would point to magnetic north. Making the necessary adjustments for where we are on the earth, I could find where true north was. One day, I took a magnet, and made the compass needle do circles. I had my fun for a few minutes, but after that, the compass no longer pointed to magnetic north. It was useless as a compass.

That is why conscience is not an infallible guide. It depends on what knowledge has informed your conscience.

One person grows up with cannibals, and feels little conscience over murder. Another person grows up with his parents never having married and feels no conscience over fornication. Another person might still feel guilty over eating meat on Friday. Another person, because of another person's sin against them, feels guilty, even in marriage, about the marriage bed.

See, conscience is a sensitive and powerful thing.

And if the light with which it is shaped is not God's Word rightly applied, it will be either an alarm that doesn't go off when it should, or an alarm that goes off when it shouldn't. It can be a dog that barks when no one is there; it can be a dog that sleeps when burglars are breaking in. To be effective it must be informed with light from God's Word. It is like a sundial – if the truth of God's Word shines on it – it will point the right way.

Not only is the conscience shaped by the knowledge we have, it is also shaped by our actions. In fact, the conscience can even be reset the more we sin.

Like those motion sensors, they can be raised so as not to pick up pets. So, if you keep ignoring or violating your conscience, it will become less sensitive. It becomes like a judge whose judgements keep getting ignored, so he either stops making them, or announces them so softly that no one can hear.

1 Timothy 4:2 *speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron,*

Titus 1:15 *To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure; but even their mind and conscience are defiled.*

Ephesians 4:19 *who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.*

A seared conscience is like skin which is so scarred that it no longer has any sensation in it. The man who steals something feels guilty the first and second time. But by the twentieth time, his conscience is no longer alarmed. The immoral person feels guilty about their first violation of their own purity. But after a while, it becomes like just scratching an itch.

But if you keep obeying the Word that you hear, you will sensitise and strengthen the conscience to respond to the right things at the right time.

Hebrews 5:13-14 *For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. ¹⁴ But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*

III. The Importance of the Conscience

There is a profoundly important reason why every Christian should seek to have a clear conscience before God and man. It is simply this: ***a guilty conscience destroys boldness.***

Proverbs 28:1 *The wicked flee when no one pursues, But the righteous are bold as a lion.*

A guilty conscience causes people to feel shame, and the result of shame is a lack of boldness before God and before man.

Think back to Adam and Eve. The moment their consciences were sounding the alarm bells, they hid. They hid from God. When our consciences are bothering us, we usually do not approach God, we avoid prayer, we avoid the Word, and we may avoid fellowship with other Christians.

Or think of how Jesus described the actions of the guilty towards the light:

John 3:19-20 *And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ "For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.*

A guilty conscience robs us of boldness before God.

A clear conscience on the other hand, gives us confidence before God.

1 John 3:21 *Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God.*

Hebrews 10:19-22 *Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, ²¹ and having a High Priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*

When you are uncomfortable in the presence of God, when you struggle to be quiet before Him, when you are restless and edgy in prayer; look to see if your conscience is not sounding an alarm.

Not only does a guilty conscience rob us of boldness before God, it robs us of boldness before men. One of the reasons why so few men have any moral boldness any longer is because their

consciences shame them into silence. They are filled with guilt over their greed, their laziness, their neglect of their homes, their pornography, their lust, their spiritual sloth, that they can barely maintain eye-contact with other men, let alone lead. They will not rebuke sin in another person when they see it, for they are walking around with un-confessed sin themselves. There is a beam in their own eye; they know they must remove it before dealing with the speck in another's. But rather than dealing with the beam, like Jesus told us to, they live with it, and simply avoid helping others with their specks. That is why there is so little one-on-one rebuke, admonition and encouragement, because men have become spiritual jellyfish due to their guilty consciences. Paul says in Galatians 6 that it is to be those who are spiritual that are to restore those overcome in a sin. The problem is, there are so many overcome with a sin, and remaining there, that few are bold enough to help others out of theirs.

The same is true of evangelism. The reason why so few speak up for the name of Jesus, why so few boldly tell others about Jesus, is because they are ashamed. Not necessarily of Jesus; they are ashamed to name Jesus because of their un-confessed sin. Romans 1:16 – they are ashamed to bring a message of repentance to others when they know they are not responding to the calls to repent from their own conscience.

Peter tells us we are to be able to speak to others with a clear conscience:

1 Peter 3:15-16 *But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; ¹⁶ having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.*

Consider Paul's testimony:

Acts 24:16 *This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men.*

2 Timothy 1:3 *I thank God, whom I serve with a pure conscience, as my forefathers did, as without ceasing I remember you in my prayers night and day,*

2 Corinthians 1:12 *For our **boasting** is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you.*

What would be the difference in our individual walks with God if we had clear consciences? How would it change our prayer life, our devotions? How would it change our boldness to disciple one another, to correct our children, to call sin what it is? How would it change our witness and evangelism?

1 Timothy 1:5 *Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith,*

The whole Christian life is to be love for God from a pure and sincere heart out of a good conscience.

The conscience watches and afflicts us. The conscience is informed by our sources of moral information and by our actions. A clear conscience is necessary to have boldness before God and man.

So, in light of all this, how does God tell us to clear our consciences? What does the Bible tell us to do to have pure and clean consciences before Him?

IV. The Clearing of the Conscience

1) Stop ignoring it. Your conscience is there for a reason, and it is not meant to be ignored.

Generally speaking, you should not violate your conscience. That is much of the point of Romans 14 and I Corinthians chapters 8 to 10. If you have come to a belief about something using the Word of God, then you must keep to that conviction before the Lord, unless the Word persuades you otherwise. And as we live amongst each other, we must treat each other's consciences very carefully, not despising each other's convictions, nor treading all over one another's consciences with our own actions. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind – using the Word of God.

Whether it is right or wrong, it does you no good to ignore the alarm. If your alarm goes off at home, there is either an intruder in the house, or there is a fault in the alarm. But it won't do you any good to just throw a brick at the siren. It is the same with your conscience - either there is a sin, which needs to be confessed, or the conscience is faulty and needs to be conformed to God's Word.

Ignoring your conscience produces problems of its own.

If you ignore your conscience, you begin to think you can sin without consequence. You begin to think that you can obey God in spurts, in stops and starts, and it won't hurt if you take a break from obeying Him here and there, now and then.

You become expert at all kinds of schemes – minimising, blaming, distracting, excuse-making, covering etc. These only decrease the light and further adjust the conscience.

2) Compare your conscience's judgement with the Word of God.

If your conscience is alarmed, it is alarmed because it believes you have failed to do right. You then must compare its judgement with God's judgement.

Psalm 119:11 *Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You!*

If your conscience is wrong, then you must inform it with the Word. You can tell it that it is a false alarm, and it needs to settle down.

1 John 3:20 *For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things.*

Furthermore, you need to keep informing your conscience with the Word of God so that it does go off when it should. This is why it is so important that you are taking in the Word of God daily. This is why it is important that you are with believers every time we meet to open the Word together, so that your conscience can receive the light it needs to correctly judge your actions.

If God has said it is a sin to do this or to fail to do that, then you must agree with God and your conscience.

3) If you have sinned, confess and forsake it.

Proverbs 28:13 *He who covers his sins will not prosper, But whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.*

Confession is very simple. It is pleading guilty before God. It is agreeing with His verdict on your actions. The Word of God, by the Spirit of God, through your conscience, accuses, and you agree with Him.

You agree with Him as one turning away from the sin. It does no good to agree that something is a sin and continue on in it. There must be a genuine desire to stop.

Now there are two reasons why you can confess your sins and expect your conscience to be calm.

Firstly, God has provided a blood sacrifice to cleanse you.

Recognise that blood alone can cleanse sin, not self-effort, not discipline, not sincerity

Hebrews 9:12-14 *Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?*

Secondly, God delights to show mercy to sinners who repent.

Micah 7:18 *Who is a God like You, Pardoning iniquity And passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in mercy.*

If God hated to show mercy, what motive would there be in coming to Him? The fact that He delights to forgive means that you please Him when you confess your sin. Confessing your sin does not displease God; it pleases Him. The sin is what displeases Him, but refusing to confess only makes matters worse.

Because God has provided the means for your cleansing from sin, and delights to continue to forgive, we must confess our sins as often as we become aware of them. We must confess our sins as often as we need to.

1 John 1:9 *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

Repeated confession is not an abuse of grace if you are trying to please God.

This is what happens with a sin we are struggling with. We start out by obeying I John 1:9. We sin again. We confess our sins. But after a few times, we begin to think – I am abusing I John 1:9. I can't just keep sinning and confessing. This is abusing the grace of God.

So instead of confessing, we don't confess, somehow thinking we are better off if we don't. But in the meantime, we are hardening ourselves to the cries of our conscience, displeasing the Lord, and living with the fear and lack of boldness that comes from doing so.

Here is the truth - the only time I John 1:9 is abused is in the mind of someone who uses it as an excuse to sin again. It is not abused by a person who has sinned again, and needs it. It is not abused by a person who has sinned again and genuinely confesses it with a view to forsaking it.

If you are in a pattern of sin, where right now it is like climbing a muddy mountain, and almost every step is a slip, then I John 1:9 is there as often as you need it. There is no limit on how many times God forgives the one who genuinely confesses. He forgives when He knows you will fall again. He forgives knowing how long you will struggle with this sin. But in the meantime – you keep confessing.

Because, while you do so – you are keeping your conscience in tune with the Word of God. You are remaining filled with the Spirit. What that will mean is all the likelihood that you will sin in that area less.

So it might be 1000 times of I John 1:9 today. Tomorrow it might be 945 and the following day 897. But keep coming back to the blood of Christ. It is there to cleanse you. Not once a day, but over and over and over again. God delights to forgive you. He wants to cleanse you.

There is a Fountain Filled With Blood
Drawn From Immanuel's Veins

And Sinners Plunged Beneath its flood
Lose all their guilty stains.

4) *Walk in the light of forgiveness.*

If you confess your sins, God makes a promise. Now, once God has made us a promise, what does He want us to do with that promise? He wants us to regard it as true, and act and think like it.

Picture that thief on the cross. He called on Jesus to have mercy on Him. Jesus said, "Today you will be with me in paradise." What if he had responded, "How can I know that? How can I be sure? I don't feel forgiven. Besides, how can I be saved in my last moments when I have lived my whole life for self? If we weren't on these crosses, I wouldn't even have come to you, Jesus. I can't really be sincere. I don't see how you could forgive someone like me."

What word would you have used to describe the man's attitude? Humility? Sincerity?

Unbelief.

If God has said he will forgive repentant sinners, we honour Him by believing His Word. Like a master will say to a well-trained dog – 'settle down' and it will stop barking, so the Holy Spirit can say to our consciences, settle down. We can say to our own consciences, settle down. The sin has been found, and dealt with.

One pastor said that some people would come to him and say, 'I confess the same sin a thousand times'. He would respond, you should confess it once, and then thank God a thousand times for forgiving you.

Your conscience is a precious thing. You ought to live in light of it. You can't get rid of it. But you can harm it and abuse it. Instead, you have to expose it to the Word of God, agree with God where there is sin, confess and forsake it, and then rest in that forgiveness.

We need our boldness back. Boldness in witness, boldness in ministry. It will only come back with a clear conscience.