

## Is Your Conscience Working For You?

1 John 3:18-24

Our text is a portion of the Second Lesson for today. From 1 John 3 we listen again to verses 19 & 20.

*<sup>19</sup> This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence <sup>20</sup> whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

One of the best inventions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the ATM, the Automated Teller Machine. With this device a person could make a deposit into an account, check the balance of an account, transfer funds between accounts and, of course, withdraw cash from an account. When the ATMs were first introduced to the public, it was not uncommon to hear about an ATM malfunctioning and either not giving out the requested money or giving out too much money. Most of those problems have been solved by the new generation of ATMs with their new technology. You seldom hear about run-away ATMs anymore. But even with all their sophisticated electronics, there is still a possibility of human error.

That's what happened a couple weeks ago in New York City. Because of a human error in the way the machine was loaded, an ATM started giving out two twenty dollar bills every time someone requested one twenty dollar bill. So if a person requested \$100 (five 20's) the machine would give \$200 (ten 20's). What made this more interesting was that the receipt for each transaction did not show the overpayment.

What would you do if this happened to you? There was an emergency telephone right there next to the machine, a phone that could be used 24 hours a day to contact the bank and report a problem. Most people took the money, as much as they could get, and then called their relatives and friends to come and get some free money for themselves. A bank spokesperson wasn't surprised at the eagerness there was to profit from the malfunctioning machine. What did surprise the manager was that one person did call in the next day to report the overly generous machine. "I was really surprised the gentleman called," the manager said. "He felt guilty and wanted us to know what had happened. His conscience was bothering him." Over sixty people took advantage of this ATM machine, maybe as many as seventy-five. Only one had a guilty conscience.

Is this typical of the state of things in our society today? Are there only one or two people in every 100 who have a tender conscience, who feel guilt? Therapists and counselors and radio talk show psychologists tell us that is a good thing! They say that guilt or the feelings of guilt are one of the major causes of stress, unhappiness and emotional distress among people today. Some go as far as saying, "A guilty conscience is your worst enemy in life."

What is your conscience, anyway? How does it work? What does scripture have to say about it? Do you have a conscience? Is your conscience working for you?

The word 'conscience' is used over 50 times in the New International Version translation of the Old and New Testament. There are also a number of passages in Scripture where the actual word 'conscience' is not used, but it is clear that the conscience is meant. For example, Isaiah 30:21 (NIV) *Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."* The 'voice,' of course, is the conscience. That's also the case with today's text where we read, *"we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us."* (1 John 3:19-20 NIV). The 'heart,' in this context, is the conscience.

The conscience is a precious gift from God. It is something we all have. It is a 'sense' or a 'faculty.' Everybody gets a conscience. And the conscience serves two very important functions. First, the conscience works to make us conscious of God. It is the conscience that tells people there is a God. It is the conscience that tells people that things are not right between them and God. In the past, when there was a flood, or a tornado, or a drought, or a hurricane, it was their consciences that told people the god or gods were not happy with them, that they were being punished for something they had done. It was their consciences that led people to try to appease the god or gods with sacrifices of grain or animals or even human sacrifices because their consciences told them, "There is a God, and things are not right between you and God."

In reality, the conscience has been given to point us to the true God, the one who created the universe, our world and everything in it. The true God is the one who wrote his law, his moral code into our hearts, into the heart of every person. Your own knowledge of what's right and wrong is based on your knowledge of this moral law written in your heart. And that brings us to the second function of the conscience. It urges you to do what you believe to be right. It urges you to refrain from doing what you believe to be wrong.

Now your conscience is not your knowledge of right and wrong. Your conscience works with your knowledge, your understanding, of what is right and wrong, the same way a judge in a courtroom works with and applies the laws on the books in his jurisdiction. Everybody has a conscience, but everybody's conscience does not bring everybody to the same conclusion. Like the people at the malfunctioning bank machine, the same situation brings out different responses in different people. Only one person felt compelled to notify the bank of the faulty machine.

Some people disregard the voice of conscience. In fact, sometimes they are told to do so by counselors and therapists. Ignore that voice, disregard that compulsion, beat down the conscience and eventually it will cease to function as intended. There was a farmer who owned a great big dog, a guard dog. One day a visitor said, "My, what a beautiful, big dog you have! What's he worth?" The farmer said, "Nothing. He's worthless. When he was a puppy, the children were babies. Every time he barked, we'd scold him so he wouldn't scare the babies or wake them up from their naps. Now he doesn't bark at all. He's not worth a thing as a watchdog." It's the same with the conscience. Ignore it, disregard it, beat it down when it speaks up and it will get more and more quiet until you can hardly hear it at all.

Sometimes people listen to their conscience, obey their conscience, but their own knowledge of what is right and what is wrong, their knowledge of God's moral law is faulty or incomplete. Back to the illustration of a judge in a courtroom. If someone tampered with the judge's law books and rewrote the laws to say the opposite of what they originally said, the judge, when applying the laws in his books

would be making the wrong decision. Not because the judge is in error, but because his knowledge of the law is in error because of the tampered-with law books.

Early in his life, the Apostle Paul, known then as Saul, was compelled by his conscience to round up Christians for persecution and death. His conscience prompted him to do what he thought was right. Your conscience prompts you to do what you think is right. But sometimes, what you think is right and what God says is right are two different things. That's the case in our society today with many people under the age of 30, the so-called 'millennials.' Even with an active conscience, for many millennials, the acts of living together without marriage, practicing an active homosexual lifestyle or obtaining an abortion, don't bother their consciences. They have been conditioned by decades of societal propaganda to conclude that these things are permissible. The media, movies, teachers, television series, books, their peers, song lyrics have all out-influenced and drowned out the Word of God. Their consciences no longer tell them that these behaviors are sinful. In many cases, they are no longer aware that God's clear Word calls these actions sinful.

Sometimes people's consciences tell them it is wrong, it is sinful to wash your car or mow your lawn on Sunday or to dance or to drink any alcohol. It is not their conscience that is in error, it is their erroneous knowledge of what God's Word says and doesn't say. Sir Richard Marbley was a British colonial officer in the 1800's in India. He wrote in his memoirs of a confrontation with a Hindu priest at the death of a prominent Hindu man. The priest said, "Our conscience compels us to burn this man's widow on the funeral pyre with her husband." Marbley replied, "And our conscience compels us to punish you with execution by hanging if you do that!" (The widow was released and allowed to live.)

The Apostle Paul, who encouraged believers to obey their conscience, admitted that his conscience could lead him to a wrong conclusion. Only God's will is perfect. 1 Corinthians 4:4, *My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.* Our inborn knowledge of what is right and what is wrong needs constant instruction and correction and strengthening from God's Word, the Bible. You have to give your conscience the correct guidelines to properly judge your thoughts and actions. And that leads us to the point of today's message.

We all fall far short of perfection in our lives. We give in to temptation. We lose control of ourselves in anger. We hate, lust, gossip, lie, cheat and deceive others. We daily sin much. And if your conscience is working for you, it reminds you of this fact daily. And it reminds you, as our text says, "*God knows everything.*" He sees all our faults, all our slip-ups. He hears all our bad language, all our lies. He knows when we involve ourselves in calculated, premeditated sinning. This should make us feel ashamed, guilty and even fearful because God says clearly he is a just God and he punishes sin. These feelings of guilt are good. They remind us that we are sinners in need of salvation. They lead to contrition, feeling sorry for sin. They lead to repentance, recognizing that something is a sin and turning away from that sin.

But sometimes, despite your confession of wrongdoing, despite prayers for forgiveness, despite the assurance of forgiveness in the Absolution and in the Lord's Supper, despite all this, there is something you've done, something you've participated in and your conscience can't seem to get over it. It surfaces regularly. It haunts you over and over again. And despite your best efforts, you're not really at peace. Your conscience still bothers you. Guilt is like drops of acid eating away at your soul.

Some people within the family of believers are bearing enormous guilt right now. They are struggling with a conscience that is inflamed with years of guilt that won't go away. If your conscience is accusing you in this way, if your conscience is condemning you, just remember: God is greater.

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Your conscience doesn't have the last word - God does! When you have troubled bouts of guilt with your conscience, listen clearly to what it is saying. But then you also have to listen to what God has to say. And God's message comes to you through the cross. Are you bothered because of sin? Are you concerned about sin's consequences? So was God. That's why he sent his son into the world. That's what Jesus was taking care of on the cross. He was bearing the penalty for all sin including those sins that may be bothering you right now. His sacrifice was all that was needed to pay for every sin, no matter how evil and unforgivable it may seem. He has done it all. For his sake and through faith in him, you have forgiveness. Does this sound too simple? Can forgiveness really remove guilt? It does with God. Jesus has taken your place under God's law. He was condemned by the law as your substitute. He was executed in your place. With God, forgiveness in Christ is the end of sin.

You know, an overly-burdened conscience can be a trick of Satan. It's a trick that attacks the very foundation of faith. The devil likes to remind you of your guilt. He likes it when your mind dwells on past sins. He wants you to try to accept personal responsibility for doing something about it. Actually, this kind of thinking questions Christ's death on the cross for you. It says: "The sacrifice of God's son wasn't enough to remove my guilt. I'm still responsible!"

The devil wants to lead people to despair. He wants people to give up hope in the redeeming work of Christ. Judas Iscariot isn't Satan's only success story. Despair over a sin has led more than one person to give up hope in forgiveness, to give up the desire for life itself.

We are reminded today to have confidence before God, that all our sins are forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ. He takes away the burden of guilt and it all starts with trust in God's forgiving love.

*<sup>23</sup> And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.*

Your conscience is a precious gift. It is there to work for you, to guide your actions and to judge them against your knowledge of God's will. Search the Scriptures. Learn to know God's will. And listen to your conscience. And remember, God is even greater. You can have a clear conscience and abundant confidence before God through faith in Jesus. Amen.