

Is Your Conscience A Good Guide?

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Walt Disney's iconic cartoon character, Jiminy Cricket, made popular the maxim, "Let your conscience be your guide!" But from a Christian perspective, is that wise? What is the conscience, and what does it reveal in an individual? What good does it provide us? Should a person, especially a Christian, trust his conscience?

In Acts 23:1, the apostle Paul writes, "I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." Is this even possible, and should we be striving to do the same thing?

1. Does the Bible define conscience? Romans 2:14-15.

Comment: *Suneidesis*, translated as "conscience" and used 32 times in the New Testament, was introduced to the biblical lexicon by Paul. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* defines it as, "An inner witness that testifies on the rightness or wrongness of one's actions or motives and, on the basis of them, pronounces judgment concerning the worth of the person." Put simply, it is a person's internal moral sense.

While Paul does not provide a formal definition, what he writes in Romans 2:14-15 comes close:

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them. (English Standard Version)

Conscience can be seen as a gift of God that provides human beings with the capacity for accurate self-examination, particularly when used in the light of God's truth as illustrated by I Corinthians 4:4. We should realize that it is not a dictator of our beliefs, but a response that reflects our current values (Romans 9:1; II Corinthians 1:12; 4:2; 5:11).

2. Is it possible to live in all good conscience? Acts 24:16.

Comment: Paul was a principled man guided by a strong conscience. His entire life displays a devotion to doing what he thought was in accordance with God's will, his conduct reflecting that sincerity. His actions as a Pharisee were governed by many of the same biblical principles extant after his conversion. In a sense, he became a Christian because God persuaded his conscience that it was the right thing for him to do. In other words, when God converted him, He did not change Paul's conscience but his perception of what was right—of what God's will actually was.

The Bible reveals Paul, prior to his conversion, as one who was sincerely wrong. His actions did not reflect the actual will of God, but instead, those of a man determined to

do what he sincerely believed was “wise in his own eyes” (Isaiah 5:21). In Acts 26:9, Paul admits, “Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.”

We should be wary of such misguided sincerity. Yet, if we strive, like Paul, to avoid hypocrisy and follow our conscience in all matters, God’s judgment will take our motivations into account (Proverbs 21:2; Romans 14:22-23; I Timothy 1:13).

3. Does a good conscience guarantee righteous works? Acts 8:1-3.

Comment: Paul’s pre-conversion zeal against “The Way,” though born of a clear conscience, was in opposition to God’s will and a genuine threat to His early disciples. We should be aware of the continued existence of this unrighteous threat to our emotional and even our physical well-being. In John 16:2-3, Jesus warns those who follow Him that persecutors will believe—in good conscience—that they are doing God a good service (see also Acts 5:32-33; 23:12-14).

On the other hand, a good, Christian conscience, when pricked, should reflect a righteous willingness to repent (Acts 2:36-38). Even though there is no guarantee that it will, a good conscience should also motivate us to forgive those who offend, threaten, or abuse us (Acts 7:59-60).

4. How does our conscience bear witness? Romans 2:14-15.

Comment: The conscience should reflect an inner belief of what is right and wrong. If those values are based on God’s truth (Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 10:15-16), sinful activity will cause us to feel guilty and motivate us to repent. Conversely, when a person who lacks Christian values commits sin, there is often no guilt associated with it nor any desire for repentance. In both of these instances, the conscience “bears witness” to the genuine values of the sinner (Judges 21:25; Psalm 51:3, 13, 17; II Samuel 24:10-25; Job 42:6).

5. Should a Christian trust his conscience? Psalm 118:8; I Corinthians 4:4.

Comment: God—not one’s human conscience—should be the final arbiter of our actions. However, our loving Creator gifted us with a conscience to aid us in our decision-making and in our response to sin. Just as we are to submit to God’s will, we must first subordinate our conscience to His law. In doing so, we significantly increase our chances of engaging in right-minded self-examination, making better decisions, repenting when required, and providing the humble and righteous witness that reflects our desire “to have a conscience without offense toward God and men” (Acts 24:16).