

Therefore, if you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed in all your glory. Therefore put the parts of your earthly body to death:淫乱, impurity, greed, evil anger, envy, malice, slander, and obscenity;淫乱, uncleanness, and covetousness. Do not let your mouth speak what is evil, but what is good for edification. Do not lie to one another, since you have stripped off the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created it—a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, and free, but Christ is all, and in all. So, as those who have been chosen of God.

The Christian Mind

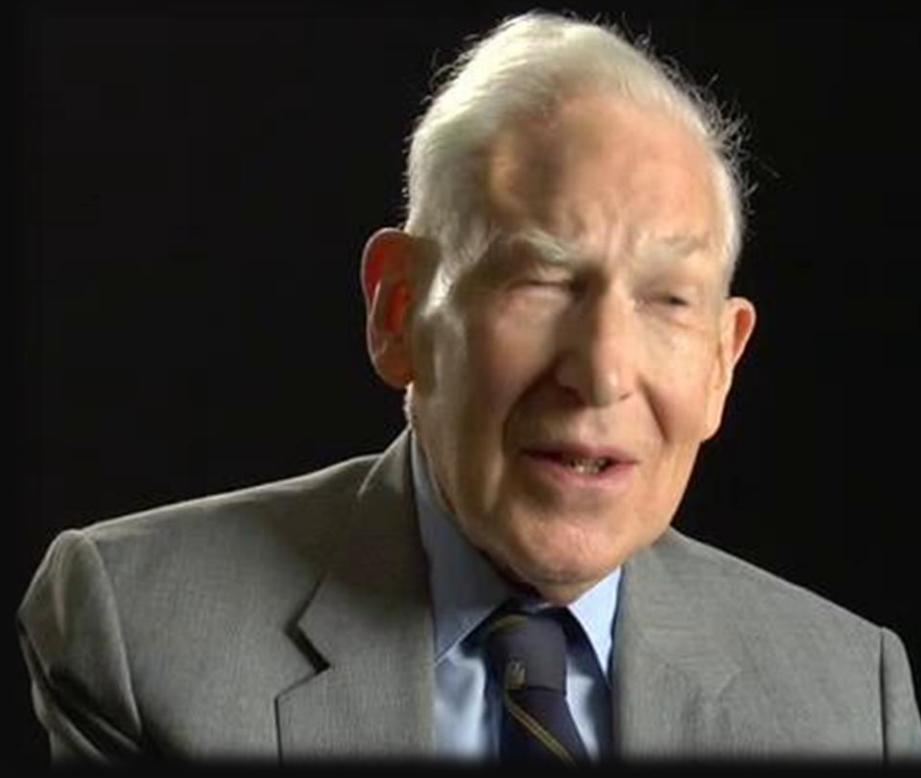
LESSON 14:

For Conscience' Sake

MEN OF THE WORD

February 16, 2022



A portrait of J. I. Packer, an elderly man with white hair, wearing a grey suit, blue shirt, and a dark tie with yellow stripes. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a thoughtful expression.

“But where do we find such an emphasis today? The frightening fact is that at the present time this note is scarcely ever struck. In Western society as a whole, conscience is in decay.”

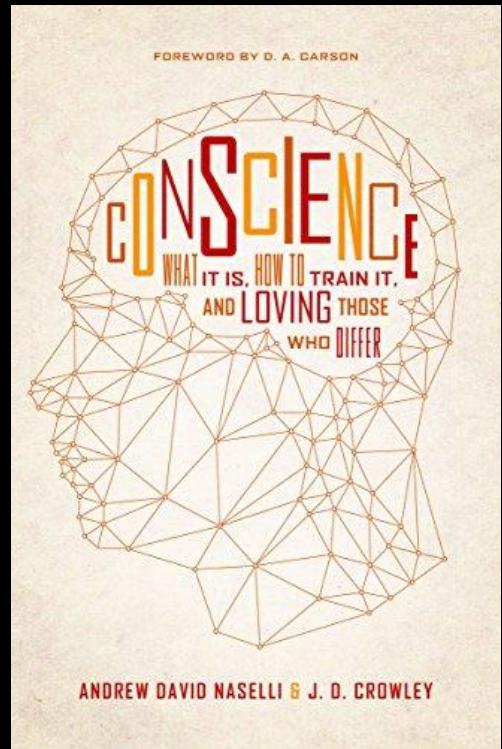
—J. I. Packer, “The Puritan Conscience,” 19

“Today’s culture aggressively and systematically tries to silence the conscience. People have been taught to ignore any and all guilt feelings conscience produces, viewing them as harmful to their self-esteem. They believe their problems stem not from their sin but from external factors beyond their control. Sin and guilt are viewed as psychological issues, not moral and spiritual ones.”

—John MacArthur, *2 Corinthians*, 30

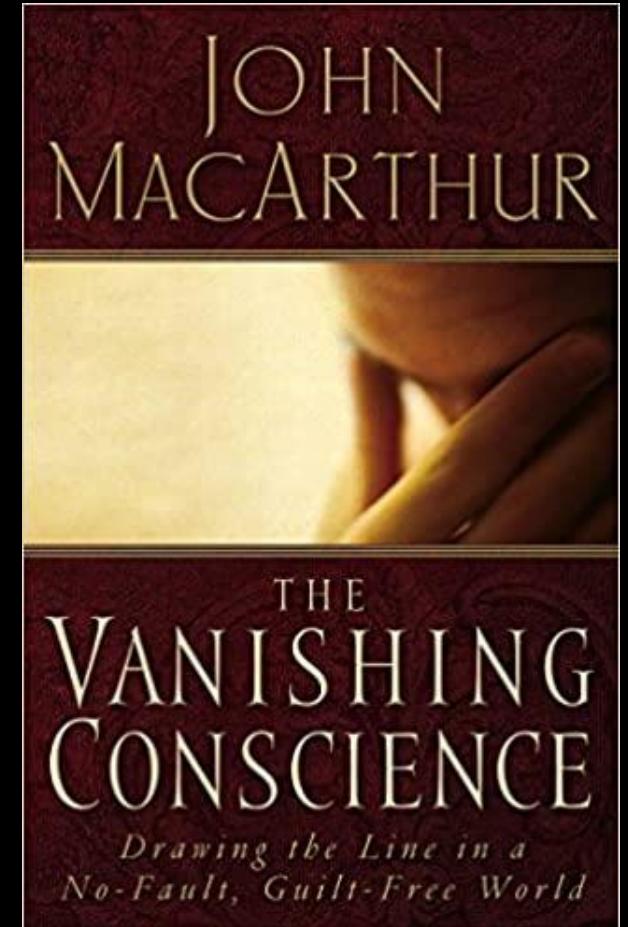
IT'S NOT
MY FAULT

Recommended Resources



Andrew Naselli & J. D. Crowley,
*Conscience: What It Is, How to
Train It, and Loving Those Who
Differ.*

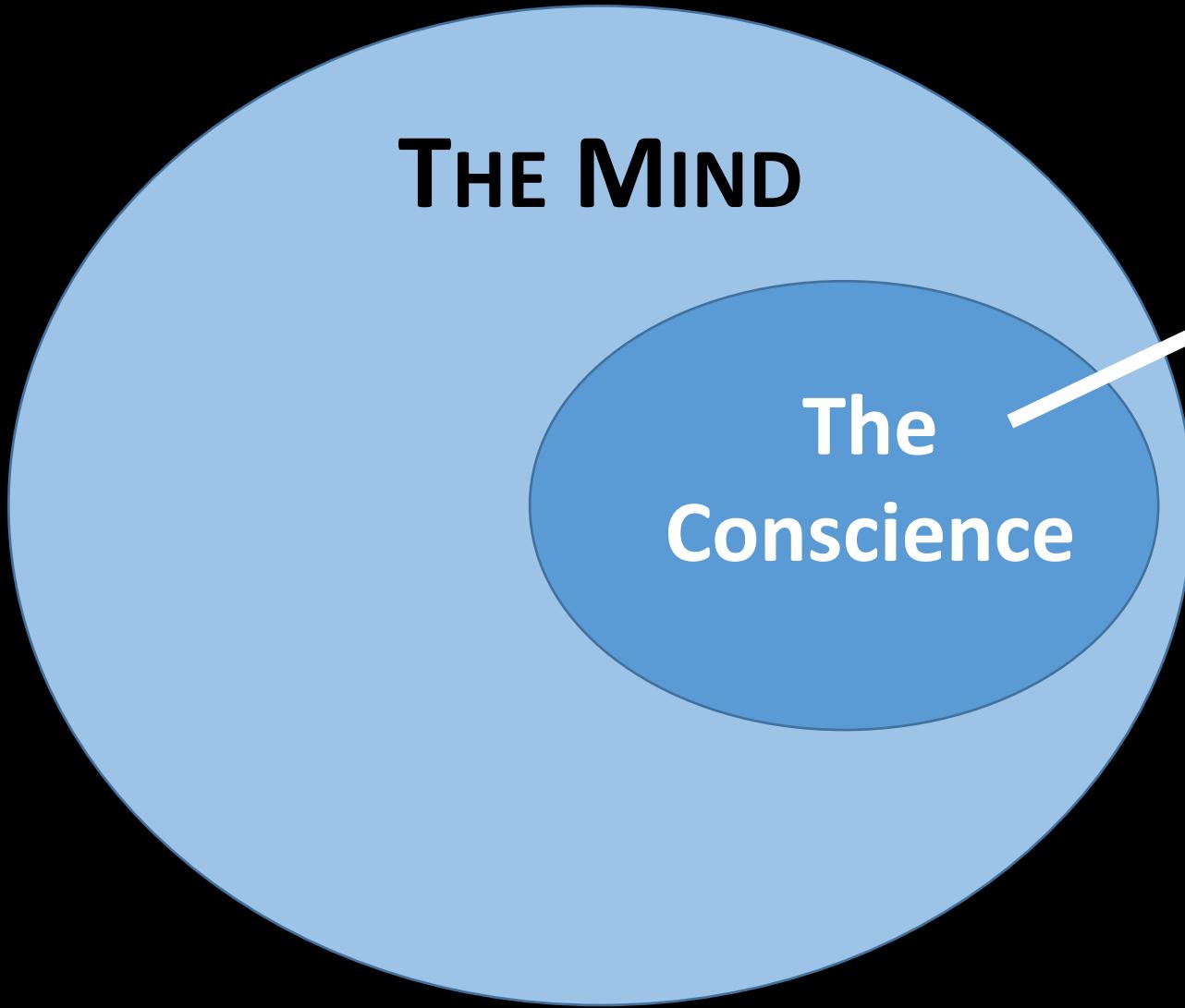
John MacArthur, *The Vanishing
Conscience: Drawing the Line in a
No-Fault, Guilt-Free World.*



I. Defining the Conscience

- What is the “conscience”?
- “God has created everyone with a conscience, the faculty of moral evaluation concerning right and wrong, good and evil. Connected with self-awareness and rational capacity, the conscience alerts a person concerning the morality of his or her actions. The conscience functions like a divine moral referee. Failure to heed the conscience often leads to guilt or shame” (MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 927).

- The conscience is “an aspect of self-awareness that produces the pain and/or pleasure we ‘feel’ as we reflect on the norms and values we recognize and apply. Conscience is not an outside voice. It is an inward capacity humans possess to critique themselves because the Creator provided this process as a means of moral restraint for his creation” (Gary T. Meadows, “Conscience,” *EDBT*, 115).
- “The conscience is your consciousness of what you believe is right and wrong” (Andrew Naselli and J. D. Crowley, *Conscience*, 42).



A faculty of the mind
designed for the
evaluation of matters
pertaining to morality
(right vs. wrong; duty
vs. discretion)

THE MIND

The
Conscience

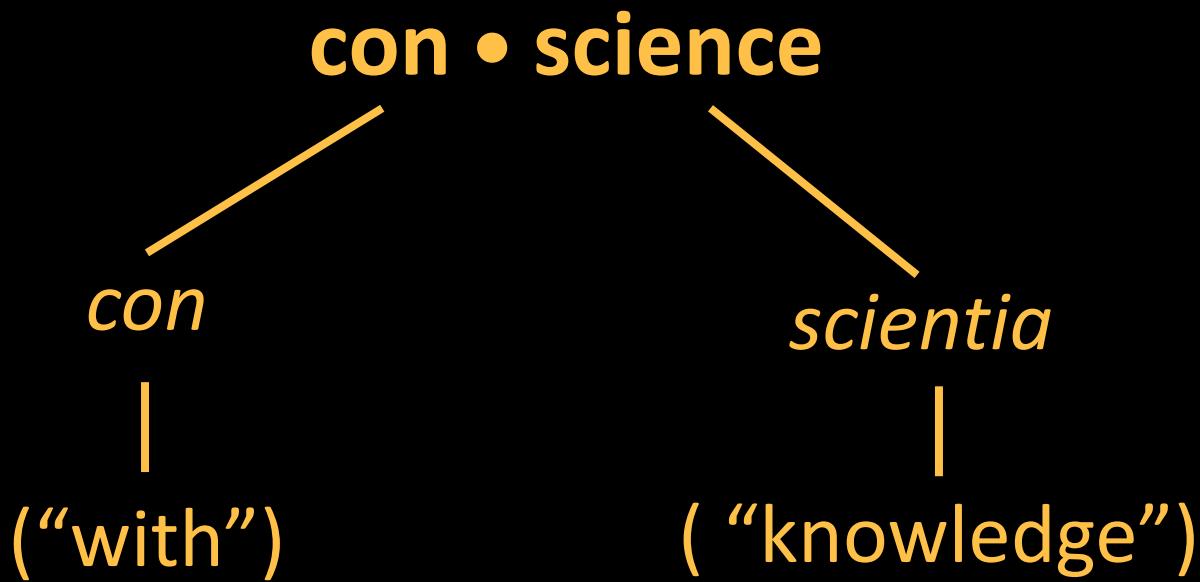


An internal judge,
adjudicating one's
past actions



An internal preacher,
exhorting one's
future actions

- It can be somewhat helpful to look at the etymology (composition) of the word itself to help understand it.



- Thus, a man's “conscience” is the knowledge about morality that is shared between God and man (see Rom 2:14–15).

- The conscience was not created to be a supreme, autonomous standard—its own source of truth.
- It is rather “a mirror to catch the light of moral and spiritual truth that shines forth from God and to reflect it in concentrated focus upon our deeds, desires, goals, and choices” (Packer, “The Puritan Conscience,” 21).

God's Truth

Man's Soul



Conscience is “the understanding power of our souls examining how matters do stand between God and us, comparing His revealed will with our state, condition, and conduct, in thoughts, words, or deeds, done or omitted, and passing judgment thereupon as the case requires.”

—David Dickson, *Therapeutica Sacra*, 3

II. Biblical Testimony to the Conscience

- The Old Testament does not have a distinct Hebrew term for “conscience.”
 - Its reality is assumed in terms like “heart” (cf. 1 Kings 2:44) and activities like “discernment” (cf. 1 Kings 3:9).
 - It is vividly pictured in David’s languish (cf. Ps 32:3–4).
- The Greek word for “conscience” (*συνείδησις, suneidēsis*) is found 30x in the New Testament
 - It is referred to most frequently by the Apostle Paul (20x).

- **Romans 2:14–15** – “For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.”
 - The moral deliberations of the unbeliever shows he has a “shared knowledge” of moral law with God.
 - Sin has corrupted this knowledge, and the unbeliever seeks to suppresses it (see 1:18), but it nonetheless remains and leaves him without excuse (see 2:16).

- **1 Corinthians 8:7** – “However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat *food* as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.”
 - A believer’s conscience can be “weak” (misinformed, oversensitive), and is “defiled” (transgressed) when he acts contrary to what that conscience urges.

- **1 Timothy 3:8–9** – “Deacons likewise *must be* men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, *but* holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.”
 - A clear conscience is one which evaluates and approves of a person’s moral conduct by using sound doctrine (“the faith”) as the standard.
 - Such a conscience is not only possible but necessary in the case of deacons.

- **1 Timothy 4:1–2** – “But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron.”
 - The conscience can be ignored, suppressed, and defiled so often than it becomes calloused.
 - Like the nerves in fingers damaged by fire, the conscience no longer transmits any impulses of critique or exhortation in such a person.

- **Hebrews 9:14** – “how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”
 - The alleviation of the conscience’ guilty pangs is the great yearning of the soul.
 - Such relief does not come through religious works, but only through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.
 - Christ’s all-sufficient sacrifice alone can remove the condemnation pronounced by a guilty conscience.

How then shall we respond?

1. Recover your conscience and its necessity in your life.

- Although our culture—and our own flesh—is determined to silence the conscience, we must awaken it.
- The conscience is that thing that keeps us up at night after sin, that warns us from taking an action we know is wrong, that defends our soul in the face of false accusations.
- Stop plugging your ears. Give conscience a seat at the table. Listen to it. Deal with its judgments and exhortations.
- Cultivate a tender conscience—one that is in constant operation.

“Conscience is to the soul what pain is to the body. We would like to avoid pain as much as possible, but at the same time we recognize that pain is a gift from God. If you didn’t have pain, you would destroy yourself. . . . Pain is critical to physical preservation. And so, the conscience is critical to spiritual preservation.”

—John MacArthur, “Cauterizing the Conscience,”
January 22, 2001

Charles Wesley

“I Want a Principle Within” (1749)

[1] I want a principle within
Of jealous, godly fear,
A sensibility of sin,
A pain to feel it near.

I want the first approach to feel
Of pride or fond desire,
To catch the wand'ring of my will,
And quench the kindling fire.

[2] From Thee that I no more may stray,
No more Thy goodness grieve,
Grant me the filial awe, I pray,
The tender conscience give.
Quick as the apple of an eye,
O God, my conscience make!
Awake my soul when sin is nigh,
And keep it still awake.

[3] Almighty God of truth and love,
To me Thy power impart;
The burden from my soul remove,
The hardness from my heart.
O may the least omission pain
My reawakened soul,
And drive me to that blood again,
Which makes the wounded whole.



- The early Puritans were disparaged as “precisions” because they were so concerned for precision in following God’s will in personal and church matters.
- When asked why he was such a “precision,” Puritan pastor Richard Rogers responded, “I serve a precise God.”

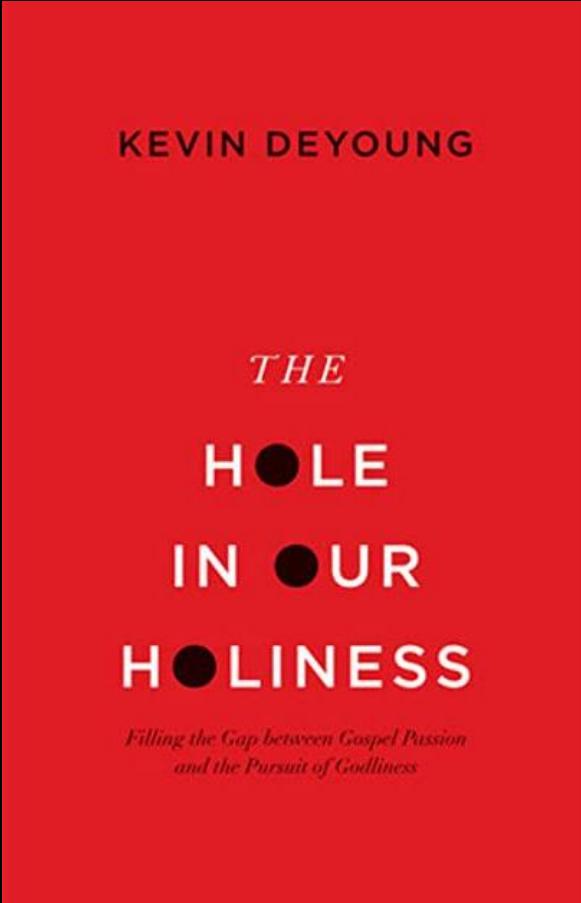
RICHARD ROGERS, M.A.

2. Obey your conscience until you can prove it wrong.

- Indeed, your conscience may be oversensitive and misinformed.
- But the surefire way to sear your conscience is to ignore it.
- Basic principle: *to disobey your conscience is sin.*



- **Romans 14:14** – “I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.”
- **Romans 14:23** – “But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because *his eating is* not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.”
- **James 4:17** – “Therefore, to one who knows *the* right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.”



KEVIN DEYOUNG

THE
HOLE
IN OUR
HOLINESS

*Filling the Gap between Gospel Passion
and the Pursuit of Godliness*

“When we violate our sense of right and wrong, even if the action in itself is not sinful, we are guilty of sin. “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). That means, if you don’t believe what you are doing is acceptable, then it’s not acceptable for you to do it. You must not ignore your conscience. . . Even if the Bible gives the green light, the red light in your conscience should not be transgressed.”

—Kevin DeYoung, *The Hole in our Holiness*, 42–43

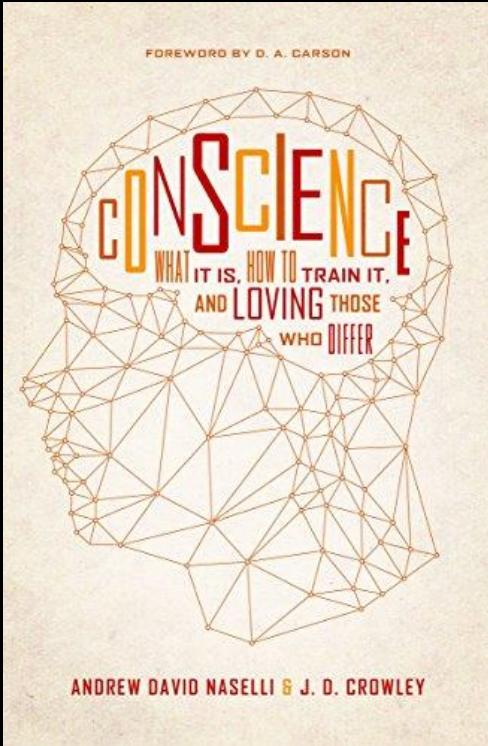
3. Calibrate your conscience to the correct standard.

- Anonymous: “The trouble with the advice, ‘Follow your conscience’ is that most people follow it like someone following a wheelbarrow—they direct it wherever they want it to go, and then follow behind.”
- The conscience was not created to be the ultimate standard of right and wrong. The conscience is not supreme, never infallible, and never immutable.
- Only Christ is Lord over the conscience.

“The supreme norm for our life is the divine law that may echo in our conscience as a voice that is dull and unclear and as though from a distance. Something can be a sin before God that nonetheless is not against our conscience. Therefore the subjective rule of our life must be brought increasingly into agreement with the objective one made known to us in God’s revelation. With increasing measure, Christ must become the content of our conscience. He makes our conscience first genuinely free, independent of all external authority, and makes the law of our own personality correspond with God’s holy will.”

—Herman Bavinck, “Conscience,” *Bavinck Review* 6 [2015], 126)

- It begins with the acquisition of an increasingly broad and accurate knowledge of what the Scriptures teach.
- It continues when the mind instructs the conscience of God's will on all moral matters.
- It leads to the cancellation of rules embraced by the conscience that were based on intuition, tradition, the community, false religion, or incorrect biblical understanding.
- It aims for the adoption of the rules that God's Word does prescribe.



“Because conscience wants to make such stark pronouncements, it is of utmost importance that you align your personal conscience standards with what God considers right and wrong, not just with human opinion. Otherwise, your conscience will pronounce guilty verdicts on matters of mere opinion.”

—Naselli & Crowley, *Conscience*, 26

“You should not believe your conscience and your feelings more than the Word which the Lord—who receives sinners—preaches to you.”

—Martin Luther



4. Protect your conscience against any violation.

- There is a priceless joy that comes from an unviolated conscience.
- John MacArthur: “The conscience is an important key to joy and victory in the Christian life. The benefits of a pure conscience comprise some of the greatest blessings of the Christian life” (*Vanishing Conscience*, 52).
- A “clean” or “pure” conscience is not the evidence of perfection, but of quick confession, true repentance, progress in the mortification of sinful habits, and the pursuit of Christlikeness.

- **Acts 24:16 –** “In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience *both* before God and before men.”
- **1 Timothy 1:5 –** “But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”
- **1 Peter 3:16 –** “and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.”

“A heart of integrity is cultivated by striving to maintain a clear conscience. Our consciences are the internal mechanism given to us by God to drive us toward sincerity. Like an internal accountability partner, the conscience acts as a witness in our hearts and minds to either ‘accuse or even excuse’ our actions (Rom 2:15). When we inform the conscience with biblical truth we are telling it to accurately hold us in check against the standard of Scripture. The conscience itself is not our benchmark, but if kept clear and clean it becomes a powerful instrument of integrity as it drives us toward the grand, inflexible benchmark—God’s Word.”

—Jerry Wragg, *Exemplary Spiritual Leadership*, 46

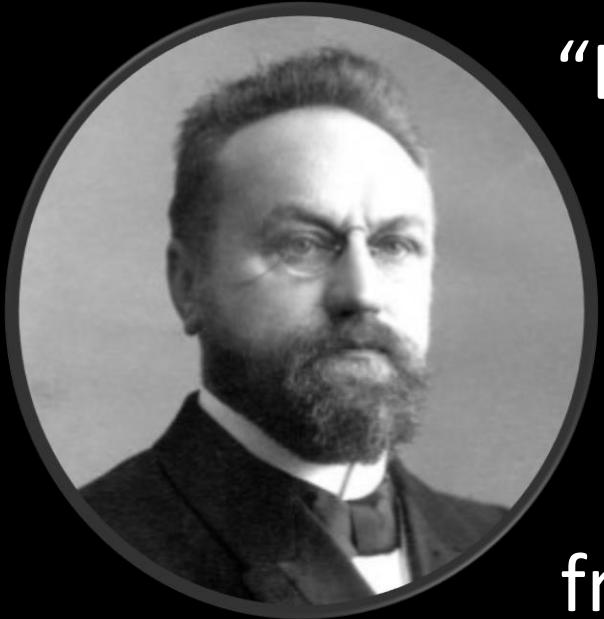
5. Enjoy your conscience when it rightly vindicates.

- Many think the Christian life is a life of constant guilt-riddenness.
- The conscience is appreciated only for its ability to condemn.
- But God created the conscience also to give us peace as we genuinely and increasingly reflect His moral character.
- Joseph Hall: “Happy is that man, that can be acquitted by himself in private, by others in public, and by God in both.”

- **Acts 23:1** – “Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, ‘Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.’”
- **2 Corinthians 1:12** – “For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you.”
- **Hebrews 13:18** – “Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things.”

6. Tend your conscience and not that of another.

- There are few things that create strife between brothers as quickly as do disagreements over issues about which Scripture is indifferent or silent.
- This has always been the case; the Apostle Paul had to deal with it in both Corinth (1 Cor 8) and Rome (Rom 14).
- In the same way that you are not Lord over your own conscience, neither are you Lord over your brother's.
- We can bind men's consciences only through the appropriate use of God's word.



“Because the conscience has received from God the authority that it has over us, and it is his law that addresses us in our conscience, which is independent of the will and power of all people, even from our own power and will, therefore the freedom of the conscience is a demand that cannot be refused. God alone, no human being, no matter who that might be, is judge of the conscience. To subject it to the judgment of the state, of the church, or of science is tyranny, a presumption of law that belongs simply and only to God and a violation of what in human personality is the most noble, tender, and sacred.”

—Herman Bavinck, “Conscience,” *Bavinck Review* 6 (2015), 125

7. Liberate your conscience by the power of the gospel.

- The conscience has the ability to condemn or defend . . . but never to redeem.
- It will inevitably identify our true state—*guilty!*—but it can never atone for it.
- If we listen to it, and only to it, it will drive us mad.
- John Calvin: “The torture of a bad conscience is the hell of a living soul.”

“Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

—Romans 8:1

HAVE A QUESTION?

Use the QR code below to submit a question pertaining to this MotW session. We will use these questions to produce additional resources to help provide you with the answers you need.



SCAN ME