

The Life of Religion: Conscience

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.” ~ Matthew 5:25

This is the third in a short series on the life of religion – which is, quite simply, “to do what is good” (D Life #1). So far we’ve reviewed the application of *charity* to life in the form of duties and benefactions, both natural and spiritual, and the influence of our *faith* on everything we think and do. Today our topic is *conscience*, and how conscience affects what we do.

Naturally, then, you may wonder about the passage just quoted from the Sermon on the Mount, but think about it. Our adversary in this case is clearly someone bringing a just claim or judgment against us, or we would not be told to “agree with him” at all, let alone quickly. And that just claim pretty obviously represents our conscience urging us to do the right thing even when another part of us really doesn’t want to – lest we be thrown into the prison of falsity and lose the precious gift of true, heavenly freedom.

So “Conscience,” we read, “is an internal bond by which a person is induced to think, speak and do good, and by which he is withheld from thinking, speaking and doing evil – not for the sake of himself and the world, but for the sake of what is good, true, just and upright” (NJHD #139, among the *Arcana* references). Following up on those references we find that “conscience in a person is formed from the beliefs that his religion has given him, depending on how deeply he accepts them” (AC #9112). There are therefore many different kinds of conscience, true, false and spurious, and many different ways of expressing it.

But before we get into all that it is at least interesting that the word, conscience, only appears in the Bible 30 times, and of those 30, 29 are in the Acts and Epistles. There is just ONE reference to it in all the Gospels (John 8:9) and there are none anywhere in the Old Testament. Why is that? – Well, like faith, this is an internal concept, and the people of the Old and even the New Testament were not really concerned about internal things, least of all apart from any benefit to themselves. They lived for the blessings of this natural life, so they were not motivated by conscience but by the hope of material rewards. When the Lord came into the world He taught a whole new way of thinking about life and urged people to act from more heavenly principles. So the apostles picked up on that and tried to inspire their new members accordingly.

Now we sometimes talk about “the pangs of conscience,” which are also explained as “anxieties of the mind on account of any injustice, insincerity and evil which a person believes to be against God and against the good of the neighbor” (NJHD #139). This is more than your standard regret or remorse, which often has to do with getting caught, or suffering some embarrassment, and it may cost you real money. For example, I know someone who filed an insurance claim based on an incident involving a \$100 deductible payment. After it was all settled the insurance company came back and said they had made a mistake, and that the deductible should have been \$500. But the case was closed – theoretically – and the company acknowledged that there was no legal obligation to pay the extra \$400, and that there would be no impact on future premiums either way. So this became a matter of conscience, a clear case where the claimant could keep the \$400 and suffer no consequences, especially since (as we all “know”) big insurance companies don’t

really need the money. Still, the conscience of what is just and right called for more.

This fits exactly with what we find in the Writings in at least two places, where we read,

“If someone has in his possession another person’s goods without that person’s knowing it, which makes it possible for him to keep them without fear of the law, loss of position, or loss of reputation, and yet he returns those goods to the other person because they are not his own, he has conscience. He does what is good for its own sake, and what is right for its own sake. Or if someone has the opportunity to attain an eminent position, and then, on seeing that another who seeks it is more useful to the country, yields the position to that other person for the sake of the country’s good, he has conscience” (AC 9120, NJHD 136).

It doesn’t take too much thought to realize that this sort of decision could cost a lot more than, say, a few hundred dollars. It could cost a person his or her career, quite possibly a career that would provide for *a family* or any number of other opportunities. So let’s not pretend it’s going to be easy. In fact, we’re going to need all the support we can get – from friends, family members, business associates, and, yes, our own prayerful reflection.

This in effect is what the Writings mean when they speak about shunning evils as sins against the Lord. And it’s not just theoretical; it’s practical in a very big way. It’s where religion really affects our lives, or as they say, “where the rubber meets the road.”

But there are various aspects of conscience, too: it’s not just one all-encompassing thing. For example, “There is a conscience of what is good, and a conscience of what is just” (NJHD #134). The first has to do with an inner, spiritual good; the second to things in civil and moral life. We can also have a true (or genuine) conscience, a spurious (or counterfeit) conscience, and a false conscience, as we read in AC #1033.

“True conscience is formed by the Lord from the [genuine] truths of faith. Spurious conscience is formed with gentiles from the religious worship in which they have been born and brought up [even though it is not really right]. For them acting contrary to that religious worship is acting contrary to conscience. [But] when [this] is grounded in charity and mercy, and in obedience, they are able to receive a true conscience in the next life, and do indeed receive it. In fact there is nothing they would rather have than the truth of faith.

“False conscience [however] is a conscience formed not from internal things but from external, that is, not from charity but from self-love and love of the world. In fact there are people who *seem to themselves* to be acting contrary to conscience when they act against their neighbor, and who also at such times seem to themselves to be inwardly smitten. Yet the reason is that they perceive in their thought that their own life, position, reputation, wealth, or financial gain is at stake, and so perceive that *they themselves* are being hurt. Some inherit this soft-heartedness, others acquire it for themselves. It is however a false conscience.”

These passages highlight the fact that the quality of a person’s conscience is directly proportional to the quality of the information that person believes to be true. It might be absolutely true, it

might be based on fallacies and appearances, and it might be really wrong, based entirely on selfish interests. In addition there's a kind of compulsiveness or obsession that may be inspired by what the older translations of our doctrines called "conscience mongers." This comes up in a discussion of correspondences in the human body, and how certain spirits affect the functions of various parts of our bodies. As Swedenborg said,

"Some of these spirits ... are such that they raise scruples in matters where there need be none; hence because they burden the consciences of the simple, they are called conscience-mongers. What true conscience is, they don't know, because they make everything that comes up a matter of conscience; for when any scruple or doubt is suggested, if the mind is anxious and dwells on it, there are never lacking things to strengthen the doubt and make it burdensome. When such spirits are present they also induce a sensible anxiety in the part of the abdomen immediately under the diaphragm. They are also present with people in temptations. I have talked with them, and noticed that they have not enough extension of thought to acquiesce in the more useful and necessary things; for they were unable to give attention to reasons, being *tenaciously set in their own opinion*" (AC #5386).

As strange as this may sound, it makes perfect sense when you consider all the little things that sometimes upset us – things that just don't seem right to us but that in the long run probably have nothing to do with spiritual life and are simply not worth worrying about. In particular, it seems we need to be careful not to impose our own conscience about these little things on others, and if we can let them go altogether we might be a lot happier. For example, some people obsess over tidiness and get really upset when things aren't put away neatly where they belong. And yes, of course! – Neatness is a virtue! – but it may not have anything to do with a genuine conscience.

Again, conscience is drawn from the truths of faith, that is, the teachings of one's religion, and as you heard in our third lesson, those who are more enlightened than others in the truths of faith and whose perception is clearer can be endowed with a *more perfect conscience* than those who are less enlightened and whose perception is dim" (AC #9114).

Now this may sound silly but a serious question that arises from this is whether or not we *want* a more perfect, more enlightened conscience. Most of us have trouble enough with the limited conscience we already have; why would we want to burden ourselves with even more?

Fortunately, the answer to this question is easy, and should be very reassuring: the reason we should want a more perfect, more enlightened conscience is because the truth is always better than falsity – better for our own health and welfare, better for the uses we want to accomplish, and better for all the people whose lives touch ours. What's more, false or misleading ideas, or even simple external appearances that obscure a deeper reality can be *much more difficult* for us than the merciful, sane and sensible truths that arise from a good doctrinal study of the Word. For example – taking an extreme case – in some primitive cultures people believed that God (or "the gods") can actually be appeased by human sacrifices, perhaps first-born babies or young virgins in the prime of their lives. This sort of thing was rife in Canaan when the Jews first conquered the land, and it's one of the reasons they were allowed to do so. Or to take a less extreme example, some people today believe that Christians absolutely must give 10% of their income to the church in order to receive the Lord's blessings. But this is based on a literal interpretation of selected Biblical passages and may in fact cause unnecessary hardship for people who are just

barely able to provide for their families. Sure, tithing is a good idea generally speaking, but the real significance of it is in the spiritual sense, which involves giving *all that you can* in the acknowledgment that it all ultimately comes from the Lord.

And here's the thing about having a more perfect conscience: although it is formed by the truths of faith it is actually a function of a person's will, and *not* just the understanding. In the case of a true conscience we call it "the new will" as opposed to the worldly or selfish will. And the better, deeper and more perfect the understanding is, the easier it is for the will to absorb it and act according to it. Again, as we read,

"Since acting contrary to conscience is acting contrary to the new will, contrary to charity, and contrary to the truths of faith, consequently *contrary to the life* that comes to a person from the Lord, it is evident that *a person feels calm and at peace, experiencing inner bliss, when he acts according to conscience*, but uneasy, indeed anguished when he acts contrary to conscience" (AC 9118).

So who doesn't want peace of mind? And how else can you possibly get real peace of mind apart from knowing, understanding *and telling* the truth?

This brings up one final point (for now) about conscience. Because it is not really about ourselves but about what is good and true, although our primary use of conscience must be to amend our own lives, there is also a place – a very sacred place – for telling the truth about something that is wrong in the world around us. For if we don't speak up we may inadvertently allow some evil to continue unchecked and to harm other people, or society as a whole. This is one of the toughest challenges many of us will face, as it can alienate friends, family members, business associates or others, and it may cost someone his or her reputation. Therefore great care must be taken lest an accusation do more harm than good. Still, the truth – indeed the whole truth – must be told. Falsity and evil must be exposed. And if you and I don't do it, who will? As Edmund Burke said in the 18th century, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing," and again even more pointedly, "Nothing is so fatal to religion as indifference."

Conscience is not meant to be an onerous thing! Rather it is a guide to ensure our ultimate peace and happiness. What can we do today to cultivate that inner peace and happiness? In Matthew the Lord said to "agree with your adversary *quickly*." To do something quickly is to do it with certainty, decisively. If we do what we know to be right *decisively*, without hesitation, we will almost always find that it is a lot easier than when we engage in a lengthy reasoning process to weigh all the option and all the possible consequences. Sure, many of our options in life are complicated and take *a lot* of thought, but matters of right and wrong... not so much. And you usually know, somewhere within yourself, what is right. Why not just do it, and let the chips fall where they may? At the very least you will know you have done your best, and with the Lord's help you will be blessed inwardly even if not outwardly.

Amen.

Lessons: 1 Samuel 26:selections
Children's talk: David Acting from Conscience – sort of
Matthew 5:21-26
AC #9112-9114 and NJHD #139: two lines.