

Conscience

A sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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Jesus said, “The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” ~ Matthew 6:22-23

From the teachings of the New Church we know that the eye corresponds to the understanding, so these verses are easy to connect with the familiar New Church teaching that “Thought from the understanding opens the eye, but thought from the eye closes the understanding” (DLW 46). In other words, if you know what to look for you will see it, but if you look without understanding you will miss a *lot*.

Even without the correspondence, however, the verses from Matthew are an obvious metaphor. The eye is not really a lamp, nor is a person’s body filled with light or darkness through the eye. What is meant here is that a good – or more particularly a true – way of seeing things will guide a person into a good and truthful life. So this is actually a reference to the human conscience. The light that guides a person in his outward actions is his conscience.

Now most people would probably say they know perfectly well what conscience is, and to a point that is probably true. But did you know that there are actually three kinds of conscience? There is a true conscience, a spurious (or pseudo) conscience, and a false conscience. There are also spirits called “conscience-mongers,” who torment people about things that are actually of very little consequence, making them feel guilty for no good reason. Our purpose today is to review some of the key teachings about conscience and to offer some encouragement about the benefits of a true conscience, and a little guidance about the other two kinds.

Let’s begin where we left off with the children. As we noted there are two places in 1 Samuel (ch’s 24 & 26) where David, who was being relentlessly pursued by the vengeful King Saul, had an opportunity to kill Saul and bring an end to this persecution. In the first incident he cut off a piece of the king’s robe as proof to Saul of his mercy, but then later “his heart troubled him” that he had done even this, “and he said to his men, ‘The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my master, the Lord’s anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, seeing he is the anointed of the Lord’” (24:6). Here the Hebrew word for “troubled” is actually “struck,” so the phrase is “the heart of David struck him.” It may seem a small thing but there is a big difference between being “troubled” and being “struck.” Correspondences are also at play here, for David represents the truth or understanding of the Word in any of us, and the heart represents the will. The point is that the will to act according to the truth is a person’s conscience, and anything that goes against that is an attack against the person’s inner life. It is very significant, then, that in this story David is being persecuted by Saul outwardly *and at the same time* he is being attacked inwardly according to his own conscience. (Note, though, the conscience does not attack! The attack is *against* the conscience; it’s an important distinction.)

The same sort of thing occurs again with David just two chapters later, only this time it is Abishai, David’s nephew and one of his “mighty men” who wants to kill Saul in his sleep. But David responds in the same way, even more forcefully seeing it is the second opportunity. And

David's words in this case are worth remembering when we face a similar opportunity to lash out against an enemy: "As the Lord lives," he said, "the Lord shall strike him, or his day shall come to die, or he shall go out to battle and perish. The Lord forbid that I should stretch out my hand against the Lord's anointed" (26:10-11).

The Sermon on the Mount comes to mind, where the Lord Himself said, "...I tell you not to resist the wicked. But whoever slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other to him also" (Matt. 5:39), and so on. There are worse things than being attacked from outside. The potential harm to one's conscience is much more serious and lasting, and much more important to resist.

Another great story about a man acting according to his conscience is that of Joseph in Egypt. You will recall that, having been sold into slavery in Egypt, he was working in Potiphar's house when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him (Gen. 39). Joseph resisted, literally running away, and for his virtue he was falsely accused and thrown into prison. But, we read, the Lord was with him, and *because* the Lord was with him he prospered, even in prison.

Things may not always work out so nicely on the natural level, but the story highlights the *inner* peace and prosperity that we can experience despite our outward troubles when we act according to a true conscience. After all, when we really believe a thing is right (or wrong) that in a way defines who we are, and to go against that is to deny ourselves – or fight against ourselves.

In fact there's a well-developed doctrine, or set of teachings, in the New Church about the conscience as a form of what is called the "*new will in the understanding*," a will of good that is "born from above," given to us by the Lord to the extent that we develop the habit of simply DOING what we know to be right. You see, everyone by nature has a self-centered and worldly will. We see it especially in two-year-olds, teenagers, and yes, if we look, in ourselves. If our thought processes – that is, our understanding – were not separated from this will, we would never be able to escape its limitations. But because we CAN raise our thoughts above what we naturally will, want, crave, desire, etc., and because we CAN compel ourselves to act according to those better thoughts, we can prepare a *form* for the influx of better loves from the Lord. This is critical, because we know that everything that flows in is received according to the form of the vessel that receives it – just as a radio receives a program according to the way it's tuned, or Jello fills a mold according to the shape and size of the mold.

This brings us to the point about the three different kinds of conscience. Not surprisingly the teaching is almost exactly the same as the teaching concerning the different kinds of intelligence and wisdom, that is to say, there is true, spurious and false intelligence and wisdom.

True intelligence and wisdom consist in the ability to see and perceive within one's self what is really true and good (HH 351). This specifically involves the truths of faith taught in the Word and it implies a disciplined learning process along with the application to life that confirms and consolidates these truths in the mind (AC 1033). So, you can't have a true *conscience* without going directly to the Word and seeing for yourself what it says and what it means.

A person has spurious, or pseudo-intelligence and wisdom, on the other hand, when he or she does *not* see and perceive the truth directly, but believes it because others have said so, and then confirms it (HH 352). Old translations of our doctrines refer to this as "historical faith," and the problem with it is that you can't always count on it to be true. It *might* be true, but it might *not*,

and how're you going to know unless you examine it and see it for yourself? But if you confirm it before you check it out you could be like any follower of any religion, no matter how bizarre, and be completely taken in by really bad doctrine. You could, for example, be taught pacifism or militarism, reincarnation or animism, deism, theism or spiritualism. You might hear Christian preachers say that faith, and faith alone in the sacrifice of Christ, is what saves you, and that nothing you actually do matters. Or you might be told either that true faith will bring you wealth and prosperity OR that it will oblige you to sell everything and live in poverty. You might just throw up your hands and say, as someone actually said to me not long ago, "I never thought it was my job to question the minister." In that case religion tends to become more of a social or traditional bond than anything really internal because, after all, you're only trusting others, and who knows for sure what's right?

But it *is* our job to examine all these traditional teachings – in the light of the Word – just as it is our job to read the fine print in a contract before we sign it, lest we be taken for a real ride.

Of course, this happens all the time with millions of people who either do not have the interest or do not have the means to examine carefully what their religious leaders tell them. Fortunately, we know that those who innocently believe what they're told and do their best to live in charity out of respect for some sort of Divine authority *are* able to gain true intelligence and wisdom, and thus a true conscience, *even if only in the life after death*, because they really do love the truth, they just need someone to present it to them in an agreeable, understandable way.

In the meantime, though, many of them have a spurious and therefore vulnerable conscience, and may be subject to a lot of abuse (see AC 1033:2, 5386 & SD 1240).

The third kind of wisdom and intelligence, and the third kind of conscience, then, is just plain false. It's not a real conscience at all because it involves a denial of God, either in theory or in practice, and a life based on purely natural, sensual, material ideas (HH 353). Now the interesting thing about this is that although it may *seem* very wise and intelligent, indeed, logical, rational and pragmatic, it is not based on any interior thought, it is only based on the evidence of the physical senses. Therefore the conscience that springs from it is also natural, worldly and pragmatic, *and changes with the circumstances confronting it*. Since there is no absolute truth, not even in science, which comes up with new theories all the time. So what's true for you may not be true for someone else, depending on the study, and what's true for you now may *not* be true *even for you* in 6 months. It will all depend on what seems most obvious or advantageous to you at the time. And if it takes others into consideration it is only because "we're all in it together" and we all affect each other. Philosophers have called this enlightened self-interest.

There is a conscience based on this kind of thinking (AC 1033:3), but the pangs of this conscience have more to do with the fear of getting caught than with the fear of doing anything really inherently *wrong*.

So, to summarize again, we can have a true conscience based on true, spiritual wisdom and intelligence; we can have a spurious conscience based on hear-say and religious tradition; or we can have a false conscience based on outward appearances, worldly measurements, and calculations without any spiritual principles.

In the first case we are motivated from within because we see for ourselves what is right and we do it lest we offend the Lord Himself. In the second case we are also motivated from within but from the love of the neighbor whom we trust but who may or may not be *worthy* of our trust. And in the third case we are motivated entirely by outside influences that play into our loves of self and the world. In all three cases our conscience may direct us to DO the right thing, but only in the first case will it be for the right reason, yielding the best results.

“Conscience,” we read in a summary statement, “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; and indeed, not for the sake of himself and the world, but for the sake of what is good, true, just and upright” (NJHD 139, AC 1919). Ultimately this goodness and truth, this justice and uprightness is the Lord working within us, and the more we acknowledge this the more powerfully we can be motivated – and helped – to “get it” and abide by it.

“Some examples,” we read, “will illustrate the nature of conscience. If someone has in his possession someone else’s goods, without the owner’s knowledge, so that he can enjoy them without fear of legal action or losing his honors or reputation, but still gives them back to the other person, because they are not his, such a person has a conscience. For he does good for good’s sake and justice for justice’s sake. There may also be someone who could claim an office, but knows that some other candidate is more useful to his country; if he yields place to the other for his country’s good, he has a good conscience; and so on in other cases” (NJHD 136).

On the other hand, we have the example of someone spending money in a foreign country, who is then accused by the “conscience-mongers” of depriving his own country of this wealth, or again, the example of a person spending money for some very useful purpose who is then bothered about depriving his family of some inheritance by doing so (SD 1240). These are illustrations of a spurious conscience. And no, it’s not always easy to tell the difference; that’s why so many people get taken in. But we can see the truth if we really think about it.

And so finally, for now, let’s reflect on the critical role of conscience in our own lives, and let’s do what we can to make sure the wisdom and intelligence we use to form that conscience come from the Lord. Remember, His concerns are not necessarily our concerns, *but ours should be in line with His*. Do we owe someone something? Have we told a lie? Been unfair? Unkind? Unhelpful? Can we address these issues without making matters worse? Let’s get on with it.

“Those,” we read, “who have not received a conscience in the world cannot receive one in the other life, so they cannot be saved. The reason is that they do not have a level into which heaven can flow and through which heaven can work. Heaven means the Lord working through heaven, and so drawing them to Himself. For conscience is a level of the mind capable of receiving influx from heaven” (NJHD 138).

Amen.

Lessons: *1 Samuel 26:1-21*
Children’s talk on Conscience

Matthew 5:21-26 & 43-48
Arcana Caelestia #1033