

REFEREE OF THE SOUL

PURIFYING THE CONSCIENCE 1

Here is the place of values, priorities, default choices, and will.



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Referee of the Soul

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Purifying the Conscience 1
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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *Referee of the Soul*

We begin an 8-part study of the conscience, and the role it plays in our souls and lives.

The mind receives and processes information, while the heart stores and deploys affections. In the soul, these overlap and interact, but they require the conscience to help them process ideas and feelings into actions.

Understanding the role of conscience, and how to keep our consciences clean and good, is an important part of growing in the Lord Jesus Christ. In the 8 installments in this series, we'll gain a better understanding of how to nurture our conscience, so that our values, priorities, default choices, and will function in accord with the good purposes of God.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Function of Conscience

...for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them)... Romans 2.14, 15

More than matter

Secular and naturalistic thinkers are determined to reduce everything in life, and especially human life, to some form of mathematical formula or electro-chemical explanation. Their approach to making sense of things is to reduce everything in life to interactions of matter.

Because secularists deny the existence of a *spiritual* realm, they do not accept the reality of such notions as *mind*, *heart*, or *conscience*, except as convenient ways of referencing what are, from their perspective, only material processes. All our actions, materialists insist, are the result of physical stimuli and responses, issuing from the brain, as part of a grand deterministic scheme in which human life has no ultimate meaning.

It should not surprise us, therefore, to see the extent to which American culture and society reflect a growing confusion of *conscience* concerning matters of right and wrong. When children in public schools are taught, implicitly and explicitly, that there's no such thing as the soul, and that conscience is simply a handy way of describing certain electro-chemical processes in the brain, why should they feel responsible for anything but self-gratification?

And even there they expect deference from everyone around them. Nothing should be permitted that prevents me from knowing maximum gratification, however I define that. The narcissism which, increasingly, describes this generation's manner of being-in-the-world bears witness to a steep decline in the sense of personal responsibility and accountability to some ultimate measure of truth.

When everything in life is nothing more than some form of matter, all sense of responsibility, meaning, or hope ultimately dissolves.

The spiritual reality of the soul

The Bible does not wince to discuss the soul and its three constituent and interconnected facets – the mind, the heart, and the conscience. Each of these is a *spiritual* reality which functions in and through the soul or spirit of every human being. As these three components of the soul work together, they determine our conduct in the world. Thus, for the proper care and feeding of our souls, it's important that we understand each of these spiritual components, so that we might make sure they are operating as God intends in our own lives.

The Scriptures teach that people are *responsible* for what they allow into their minds, hearts, and consciences, and for the extent to which they develop and use these as God intends. The Biblical description of human life makes sense because it accurately describes what we observe in and expect of others, and it holds out the hope of personal growth and improvement to all who seek it. The secular, naturalistic view of the human being cannot do so, except as it *borrow*s from the Christian view of human life and denies its own most foundational assumptions.

In the soul, as we shall see, the conscience functions as the repository of priorities, values, default choices, and the will. These are all *spiritual* phenomena, but they are no less *real* for being such. The conscience serves to engage thinking and feeling – the mind and the heart – with settled values and convictions, to bring harmony in the soul in line with divine purposes.

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If we do not understand the conscience, or do not nurture and care for it as we should, we leave the conscience vulnerable to being shaped by the spirit of the age, so that our priorities and values will be determined, not by the Word of God, but by the secular, naturalistic, materialistic, and narcissistic agenda of the day.

Referee of the soul

We are responsible for what harbors in our consciences, and for how we bring our consciences to bear on the decisions and actions we take each day. If we ignore the conscience, or act as though “conscience” is just a place-marker for whatever values and priorities our deterministic world foists upon us, we will never realize the full benefit of the power of conscience to aid us in loving God and our neighbors.

The conscience is the referee of the soul, maintaining vigilance over our thoughts and affections, and helping the mind and the heart to work together with maximum benefit for the progress of Christ’s Kingdom in our lives. Understand the conscience, and care for it accordingly, and you will discover more of the power of faith working by love in your life.

For reflection

1. What do you think people typically mean when they refer to “conscience”? Is this anything like what the Bible teaches?
2. The conscience is the repository of settled values, priorities, convictions, and default choices. Where do these come from?
3. In what sense are people responsible for the content of their conscience? Responsible to whom?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with some Christian friends about their understanding of the conscience. What’s the source of these views? How do they nurture their consciences in the things of the Lord?

2 Conscience Off Course

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron... 1 Timothy 4.1, 2

The universality of conscience

Everyone experiences the reality of the conscience. We've all felt shame, self-justification, or guilt for some failure or wrongdoing, or satisfaction over a job well done. The secular thinker may ascribe such feelings only to chemicals and reactions in the brain, but the Christian knows that these are the workings of the conscience, as it brings heart and mind into harmony or discord, according to the situation, in the workings of the soul.

God has given human beings a leg-up on getting their souls into proper working order. He has *written*, by some spiritual means, the works of His Law on the souls of human beings, so that, in every person, there exists a sense of things holy and righteous and good (Rom. 2.14, 15). In each of us, that sense is more or less true and complete, depending on the extent to which our mind, heart, and conscience are serving as God intends.

People do not all define such terms as holiness, righteousness, and goodness in the same way, but they cannot get away from the notion that some things are permissible and valuable and some things are not. This is part of what it means that human beings are made in the image of God. They have a conscience, and their consciences have a sense of what is good and true and even holy, to which people appeal in making decisions and choices in life, even if those terms are filtered through a narcissistic view of the world.

Everyone has a conscience. But not everyone's conscience functions alike, much less in the way God intends. This is because in many people, their consciences have become seared by the hot iron of unbelief and lies.

The role of the conscience

It is clear from Scripture that God intends the human conscience to harmonize thinking and feeling so that actions of beauty, goodness, and truth – as God defines these terms – issue from people's lives. But He has also made human beings the responsible care-takers of their souls. God expects us to take responsibility for the contents of our consciences, those working priorities and values that guide thinking and affections into words and deeds.

All of us must take responsibility to receive God's leg-up on values and priorities, and direct our souls and lives in accord with His good and perfect will. But people do not, in the main, respond this way. In fact, only as they come to redemption through faith in Jesus Christ do they have the power at work within them to make them willing and able to do what God approves (Phil. 2.13).

People who do not believe in God, and who refuse to engage with His agenda, can expect that the inherent ideas of goodness and righteousness, which God would write into their souls, will be hijacked, redefined, and used for self-centered purposes in an increasingly narcissistic age. The conscience, apart from saving grace, has *no resources to resist the spirit of the age*, however that spirit may be blowing. Exposed, over the whole of one's life, to influences and inputs that blow contrary to the Spirit of God, people's minds become absorbed in the lie of unbelief, their hearts are hardened against God, and their consciences become seared and calloused against the truth.

And this happens to different people in different ways, thus creating the moral confusion which characterizes our day.

Set of the saw

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And the conscience is like the set of a saw: once that cutting angle has begun to be compromised, the soul will never be able to cut a straight path to goodness, beauty, and truth, apart from divine intervention. Left to themselves, without God's truth and the reinforcement and accountability of a loving spiritual community, people today will experience their consciences going off course, taking them in directions not always to their liking, and leading them to cherish and choose things which, at other times, they may have regarded with less pleasure or importance.

Over time, the conscience, seared with lies and encrusted with false works, will drag the mind and heart into the black hole of the spirit of the age, so that the soul functions in harmony with the temper of the times rather than the intentions of God.

Christians are not immune to this tendency. As Paul explains, the conscience can go off course in Christians who refuse to take seriously their responsibility to nurture and guard their conscience as they should, causing them to *depart from the faith*, if not *intentionally* then certainly *practically* and *really*.

Which makes it all the more important that we understand the proper workings of this referee of the soul, and nurture and maintain our consciences in the best working order.

For reflection

1. How is it evident that God has "written the works of the Law" on the souls of all people?
2. Meditate on Romans 1.18-32. What happens, over time, to people who resist God and His Law? How does this affect their consciences?
3. What can Christians do to keep their consciences from being drawn off course?

Next steps – Preparation: What would you say are the most influential outside sources for shaping a person's conscience? How can you make sure those sources are not shaping your conscience in a way other than what God intends? Talk with a Christian friend about these questions.

3 The Good Conscience

“This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men.” Acts 24.16

God’s purpose for the conscience

God’s purpose for the conscience is that it should be *good*, or, as Paul puts it here, “without offense” – clear of sin or mere self-interest in its orientation to God and men. *Good* is not an idea susceptible to a wide range of relativistic interpretations. *Good* is what God says it is, because *good* reflects the very character of God Himself.

Whenever we read the word *good* in Scripture we must think in terms of that which is pleasing to God, Who *is* good. A good conscience is a conscience that pleases God because it is untainted with and unhindered by sin in its orientation to Him and to our neighbors. The goal of caring for and nurturing our souls, therefore, must be that they should become increasingly and more consistently good in every way.

Peter says the way to a good conscience is through the water of baptism, that is, new birth in Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 3.21). The writer of Hebrews agrees, saying that Jesus Christ is able to “cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb. 9.14). The conscience cannot be tuned for goodness apart from the grace of God. We cannot pass enough laws to make people value the right things and harbor good priorities in their souls. We cannot educate them enough or control them by rules and regulations of any kind to keep their souls from going off course apart from the grace of God.

If a person’s conscience is to be *good* and *clear* and *clean*, God Himself must be at work within, willing and doing of His good pleasure.

Starting-point for a good conscience

Thus the Gospel of the Kingdom is the point of the spear for renewing and purifying the conscience. We who have come to believe that Good News understand and have experienced its power to make all things new in our lives. But we must not suppose that we can help our neighbors break free of the searing of their consciences and the encrustation of wrong priorities and self-centered values apart from the Gospel of Christ.

But the way we must appeal to them with the Gospel will begin with how we live before them. We who have been redeemed, who have passed through the waters of baptism into a new conscience and a new life, must now labor to maintain, like the Apostle Paul, a clean or good conscience before God and men, so that our witness to them will carry more power to persuade.

So let’s consider two more characteristics of a good or a clean conscience, just to make sure we have the right objectives in mind as we take up the challenge of beefing-up this referee of our souls.

Toward a good conscience

First, the writer of Hebrews says that a good conscience has as a high priority “to live honorably” (Heb. 13.18). Acting honorably means acting in a way that allows the glory of God – His presence and character – to show through in all we do (cf. 1 Cor.10.31). Thus, we need to examine every aspect of our lives, both in how we relate to God and how we relate to our neighbors, to learn what is honorable and God-glorifying, so that we value and cherish those ideas, attitudes, and practices more consistently, day-in and day-out. As we do, we will find that our witness to Christ becomes more interesting and credible.

Second, Paul says that a clean or good conscience leads to works of love toward God and men (1 Tim. 1.5). Our conscience won’t be strengthened for goodness until we are loving God and the people around us more

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intently, purposely, and consistently. We need to learn what it means to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves, and then, through prayer and practice, work to make these the default values and priorities of our wills.

And to do this, we need to immerse ourselves in any teaching from God which can show us the way to love Him and our neighbors as He intends. This will mean spending more time meditating and walking in His Law.

God wants us to have a good conscience, one free of any adverse effects of sin or selfishness. But this doesn't just happen. We must look to Christ in faith, seek the counsel of His Word, and draw on the power of God's indwelling Spirit until, in His time, He begins to shape our consciences for good, and to make them pleasing to Him in all things.

And this, in turn, will see us glorifying God more consistently in our everyday lives, and will make our witness for Christ more credible and effective.

For reflection

1. What do we mean by a "good" or "clean" conscience? What can keep us from this?
2. Meditate on 1 Timothy 1.5. In this context Paul is teaching about the importance of sound doctrine (how we think and live). How can you see in this passage that the three facets of the soul – mind, heart, and conscience – work together to engender love for God and neighbor?
3. In any situation where we are faced with making a choice or taking an action, our heart (affections) will be feeling one way and our mind (thoughts) will be processing information. It's possible that the two of these may be working against one another – we *feel* one way but we *think* we should do something else. How does conscience function as "referee of the soul" in such situations?

Next steps – Demonstration: What does it look like when someone is living out a clean or good conscience? How would you be able to recognize that? Talk with a Christian friend about these questions.

4 Conscience and the Law

...for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them)... Romans 2.14, 15

The Law of love

One of the factors most destructive of a good or clean conscience is the current neglect of the Law of God on the part of the followers of Jesus Christ. I will have much more to say in subsequent installments in this series about how God intends His Law to work in our lives and communities. For now, I want to introduce the role of the Law in shaping the conscience, and the crucial role of the Law in helping us learn to love as God intends.

Jesus taught that all the Law of God and all the teaching of the prophets – who mainly interpreted God’s Law into their own situations – are summed up in the commands to love God and our neighbors (Matt. 22.34-40). Love, the Apostle John explained, is nothing other than keeping the commandments of God (1 Jn. 5.1-3). Keeping the commandments of God is not burdensome, John insisted. And Jesus said that greatness in the Kingdom of God is directly tied to learning, keeping, and teaching others to learn and keep the commandments of the Lord (Matt. 5.17-19).

The Law of God is clearly entwined with what it means to love God and our neighbors, and this is because the Law, as Paul explained, is holy and righteous and good (Rom. 7.12). The Law of God is the Law of liberty precisely because it frees us from the grip of mere *self*-love so that the power of God’s Spirit can shape us for love as He intends (Jms. 2.12).

As we have seen, God has given each human being a push in the direction of His Law by writing the works of the Law on their hearts, so that the commandments of God are there for the conscience to employ in seeking to love God and neighbors.

Law and grace

But people who turn away from God and His Law, and prefer instead to create their own morality, betray their consciences to lies and wickedness, and cannot – *will* not – seek the good conscience God intends for them.

Once saving grace begins to operate in our souls, however, we find anew the power of God to lead us to a good conscience. That is, we become able to harmonize soul and body for loving God and neighbor. But we must also get back on course with God’s original design for our consciences and take up the study of His Law. The Spirit of God, sent to us for salvation, also calls us to class for the study of God’s Law (Ezek. 36.26, 27). For only as we study and obey, and teach others to study and obey the Law of God, will we be nurturing our soul in the same way God intended when He wrote the works of the Law on our heart in the first place.

It is the consistent teaching of Scripture that those who know and love God, know and love His Law as well. The Law does not save us; rather, the Law – and here I mean the Ten Commandments and the various civil laws which illustrate those commandments – convicts us of sin, teaches us the will of God, and guides us into the path that Jesus walked, so that we may walk it as His disciples (1 Jn. 2.1-6). If we want a good and clear conscience, one exercised to love God and neighbor, we must devote ourselves to regular reading and meditation in God’s Law, and to living in that Law as the Holy Spirit instructs and enables us to do so (Ps. 1; Ezek. 36.26, 27; Phil. 2.12, 13).

No opposition exists between grace and Law in the life of faith. The Law convicts us of sin and leads us to

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lean on the grace of God. The grace of God causes thanksgiving to rise within us, so that we seek the Law of God as the measure of that which best suits us as His image-bearers and is most in line with His purposes and plans.

I am persuaded that one reason the Church's witness to our secular age has become so ineffectual in recent years is because the world does not see the kind of honor, glory, and love we might expect from souls refereed by good consciences. And the reason our consciences are not able to function in this way is because we have neglected – and in some cases, scorned – the Law of God. The prophets taught and lived by the Law of God (Ezra 7.10). The psalmist extolled the many virtues of the Law of God (Ps. 119). Jesus lived and taught and even deepened and extended the Law of God. And all the Apostles drew on the Law of God for one or another aspect of their teaching about the life of faith. Can we consider ourselves to be Biblical Christians as long as we neglect to study, obey, and teach the Law of God?

We cannot nurture our consciences to become clean and good unless that nurture is grounded in the holy and righteous and good Law of God. Each of us needs to make daily meditation in the Law of God part of his devotional life in following the Lord. For only thus will we be able to hide the Law of God in our minds, hearts, and consciences, so that we do not sin against Him but, instead, love Him and our neighbors as we should.

The Law of God, written on our hearts by His Spirit, is the *rule book* to which the conscience, the referee of our souls, must turn in leading us to love God and our neighbors.

For reflection

1. Why do you suppose many Christians these days seem to have a negative view of the Law of God? Is this justified? Explain.
2. Why does it make sense to think that the Law of God should be the primary source for our values, convictions, priorities, and default choices?
3. Do you think your own conscience would be strengthened by including reading, study, and meditation in God's Law as part of your daily discipline? Why or why not?

Next steps – Preparation: How could you incorporate regular reading and meditating in God's Law as part of your daily discipline for growing in the Lord?

5 Conscience and the Spirit

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit... Romans 9.1

The work of the Spirit

We have mentioned the Spirit of God in conjunction with the conscience. Let's elaborate on that a bit more.

The Spirit, we said, renews the writing of the works of the Law of God on our heart by teaching and enabling us to obey the commandments of the Lord. What years of neglect and sinful works had obscured, the Spirit, Who comes to us at the moment of salvation, now begins to renew, taking up the work of God again and writing the Law on our souls so that we might live honorably and in love to God and man (Ezek. 36.26, 27). As He sets the Law in its proper place in our heart, as the *rule book* for loving God and neighbors, He provides the means whereby the conscience can arbitrate between thoughts and feelings.

Apparently, if we understand Paul aright, it is the work of God's Spirit to confirm to the conscience that it is functioning in line with the good and clean purposes of God. When we are loving God and our neighbors, and when we are acting in such a way as to glorify God in all things, we should expect to know some confirming word from the Holy Spirit, assuring us that we have chosen correctly and acted according to the requirements of a good and clean conscience.

The work of the Spirit is, first, a work of *conviction* – that is, of establishing the best priorities and values – and, second, a work of *transformation*, of putting those values and priorities into action via a good and clean will (Jn. 16.8-11; 2 Cor. 3.12-18; Phil. 2.13).

A work of confirmation

As our conscience operates in line with the convicting and transforming work of the Spirit, we may expect the Spirit to *confirm* – or as Paul has it, *bear witness* – that our consciences have employed the right values and priorities, in refereeing between our hearts and minds, leading us to conduct ourselves in a manner expressive of God's love.

For example, whenever we feel convicted of sin so that we confess, repent, and turn our feet back to the paths of God's Word, we can know that the Spirit has been moving to pique, stir, and move our conscience in line with God's will (Jn. 16.8-11; Ps. 119.59-61).

It behooves us, therefore, to make time in our lives to listen for this work of the Spirit as He moves to shape and mold our consciences toward goodness (Ps. 139.23, 24).

Further, we should expect some sort of spiritual "attaboy" from the Holy Spirit whenever in our relationships with others, our natural, self-centered bent gives way for the fruit of the Spirit to come to expression (Gal.5.22, 23). Bringing forth such fruit in us is a work of the Spirit of God, which we seek, and which we perform in conjunction with His working in our lives (Phil. 2.12, 13). We will only show good spiritual fruit in our lives as we *value* and *nurture* such fruit, and as the desire to live this way provides the bit and bridle for our thinking and affections. And when that happens, we can know that the Spirit has made His indwelling presence known, and we can expect Him to confirm our choice.

Gifts, witness, worship

The same is true with the exercise of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12.7-11). As we make ourselves available to serve in the church, using the gifts God's Spirit brings with Him, we show that our values and priorities are what they should be, that the Spirit of God is working in us in specific ways, and that our consciences are good and clean before the Lord and men. The Lord wants us to receive, develop, and use His gifts to serve others in

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love. The Spirit will bear witness with our conscience as we put those gifts to work, assuring us that our consciences are clean and we are functioning according to the Lord's agenda.

When we bear witness to Christ, this too, is a priority and work of the Spirit (Acts 1.8) We will only choose such a work when the Spirit has made it a priority in our lives. When it is, our consciences will be good and clean before God and men, and we will act accordingly.

Finally, when we are filled with the Spirit, so that we overflow with thanksgiving and worship, and make ourselves the servants of others for their good, then we can know that God's Spirit is shaping our souls – mind, heart, and conscience – to reflect and practice the true spiritual values of the Lord.

The nurture of our conscience depends on our ability to follow the lead of the Spirit as He convicts and teaches us the things of Christ, transforming us increasingly into His image, beginning in our soul.

Let us therefore seek the Spirit diligently in all our ways.

For reflection or discussion

1. Meditate on Ezekiel 36.26, 27 and John 1.:8-11. Why do we need the Law of God in our souls for the Spirit to do His best work in us?
2. What do we mean by saying that the Spirit *affirms* or *confirms* or *bears witness in* our conscience? Why does this matter?
3. Meditate on Psalm 139.23, 24. Suggest some ways you might practice the teaching of this passage throughout the day.

Next steps – Transformation: Review each of the ways the Spirit of God works with your conscience. In each area, indicate one way you'd like to see more growth in your walk with and work for the Lord. What can you do to help that become a reality?

6 Guarding the Conscience

You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. 2 Peter 3.17, 18

The tendency to drift

If being grounded in God's Word and Spirit are the keys to nurturing a good and clear conscience, then failing to guard our conscience against all that is contrary to those good influences is a sure way to begin drifting off course (Heb. 2.1).

Paul saw his colleague, Demas, fall into the snare of loving this world more than Christ. He failed to guard his conscience, and lost sight of the priority of the Kingdom of God for all of life. Instead, he began to value the things of this world more than the things of Christ, and, soon enough, he abandoned the Lord's work for the "good life" in Thessalonica.

The same had happened to Judas Iscariot. Over time, the allure of money became the dominant value in his conscience, and that value ruled his thinking and affections, not only to drift, but to destruction.

Why should we consider that we are immune from such a tragedy? We are not. But if we want to keep from going off course in our conscience, we shall have to be diligent to guard our consciences against every influence of lawlessness. What does this require?

Recognize contrary influences

First, as Peter suggests, we need to be able to recognize those influences, contrary to the Law and Spirit of God, which are seeking to achieve a beachhead in our values and priorities.

They come at us from all directions, both from contemporary culture and from within the Church. Paul says that we are not our own; we have been bought with a price and we belong to King Jesus (1 Cor. 6.19, 20). Our time is not our own. Our possessions are not our own. Our work, wealth, relationships, roles, responsibilities – none of this belongs to us. It belongs to Jesus, Who purchased us out of sin with His own Body.

Of course, we are to love ourselves, and to seek earnestly to discern and pursue the calling God has for each of us. However, the guiding value and priority of our conscience must remain seeking Christ and His Kingdom above all else. Anything which suggests that you *are* your own, or you ought to do a little more for *you*, or pay more attention to *your* needs than to those of the people around you – any such voice or influence can draw you away from the pursuit of a good and clean conscience, infesting your soul with mixed motives grounded in self rather than Christ.

Learn to recognize all such influences, so that you are not carried away with them and lose your stability.

Keep on the growing edge

Second, continue growing in the Word of God, including God's Law. The psalmist writes, "I thought about my ways, and turned my feet to Your testimonies. I made haste, and did not delay to keep Your commandments. The cords of the wicked have bound me, but I have not forgotten Your law" (Ps. 119.59-61). The more we look into the Law of God, letting it serve as a mirror, both of our condition and of God's glory (Jms. 1.23, 24; 2 Cor. 3.12-18), the better we will know the holiness, righteousness, and goodness that God, by His Spirit, is seeking to write on our heart. We can never plumb the depths of the Law of God, so it is to our advantage to make the study of God's Law an ongoing and regular part of our devotional lives.

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Third, keep in mind the conscience of your fellow Christians (1 Cor. 8.10-12). Being considerate of others is an important component in Christian growth. Just as we would want others to keep in mind the influence they may have on our choices, we need to be careful not to cause others to compromise in their consciences. And we need people in our lives who will help us guard our consciences by living positive, wholesome lives before us.

Finally, as David demonstrated in 1 Chronicles 29.10-14, we need an ever-expanding vision of the living God to keep us moving in the direction of goodness and uprightness in our lives, beginning in our conscience. Only the beauty, loveliness, majesty, splendor, glory, and righteousness of God can reset, maintain, and continually improve our own priorities and values. The more we gaze upon His beauty, the more we will sense our own values and priorities coming into line with His.

Guard your conscience! The conscience is the referee of the soul, helping our thoughts and affections work together to produce godly actions in our lives. If we fail to guard our consciences, we will thwart the proper working of our souls and find ourselves compromised in our walk with the Lord.

For reflection

1. What are some ways the “spirit of the age” tries to undermine your conscience? How do you guard against this?
2. How can believers help one another to work hard for a good or clear conscience?
3. What is the relationship between a growing *vision* of God and a clear conscience? Suggest some ways of improving your vision of God.

Next steps – Transformation: Do you have an accountability partner? Someone who knows where you’re trying to grow, and can pray for and encourage you? See if you can find someone to help you in this regard.

7 Reaching the Conscience

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Acts 2.37

Challenge settled convictions

I cannot emphasize enough how important it is for every believer in Jesus Christ to work diligently and faithfully to nurture their own soul in the things of the Lord. While our focus in this series has been on the conscience – because it referees or arbitrates between the mind and the heart, helping them to come into harmony and to engender actions of love for God and neighbor – the heart and mind are equally important and must be nurtured as well.

But the mind and heart are frequently written and preached about, while, in my experience, attention to the needs of a good and clean conscience has not been much addressed.

We see what happens when the Word of God penetrates a conscience, throwing all previously-held values and priorities into confusion: "Men and brothers, what shall we do?" People will not come to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ until they see the *value* of it, so that they desire Him more than whatever false gods they've been clinging to heretofore. In our witness for Christ, as well as in our ongoing work of disciple-making, we must strive to reach the consciences of men, to challenge their settled convictions and values, and to spread out the demands and priorities of the Kingdom of God in clear and compelling ways.

A two-edged sword

This is a two-edged sword. First, as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 10.23-29, we must at all times take care to guard our own consciences and to resist the temptation of denying our consciences, either because we don't want to offend someone or we simply fear what others might think. Too many Christians turn a blind eye to the ungodly choices of their friends and neighbors, or refuse to take a stand for Kingdom convictions in some conversation where a door of opportunity has opened wide. We will never reach the consciences of others if we don't keep our own consciences good and clean, or if we are reluctant to let our good and clean consciences speak when appropriate. The strength of conviction we evidence will lend considerable weight to the truth we proclaim concerning the Kingdom of God.

And then we must be straightforward, bold, and emphatic about proclaiming the truth to others. Paul wrote, concerning his own witness, "But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." (2 Cor. 4.2). There is nothing like the truth of God, plainly and unequivocally declared, to penetrate the easy conscience of our narcissistic age.

But which aspects of the truth, in particular? First, the reality of sin.

We must not fear to say to our neighbors that they are sinners in God's sight, and, if necessary, to explain in relevant detail why that is so. Here again is why it's so important for us to be grounded in the Law of God, since, as Paul explained, by the Law of God comes the knowledge of sin (Rom. 7.6).

Second, we must explain the Gospel of the Kingdom. We call people to see and receive a Kingdom – a whole new realm and way of life – over which Jesus Christ reigns as King. He intends to own them like He owns us, and to fill their lives with purpose, peace, righteousness, love, and joy as well. But this will not happen unless, hearing the Good News, they give themselves freely and fully to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Referee of the Soul

Finally, the need for repentance. You cannot come to Jesus, you cannot enter His Kingdom unless you repent of your sins and begin to walk a new path. The call to repentance is a challenge to face up to our values, priorities, and convictions – the stuff of the conscience. As the Word exposes false values and priorities, and the new and more glorious values and priorities of the Kingdom are explained, people will feel their hearts pierced and their consciences quickened in what can be life-changing ways.

But for this to happen, we need to *live* the truth before the people to whom God sends us, keep guard over our own conscience and life; and we need to *proclaim* the truth that is in Jesus, and everything that is necessary for coming to faith in Him.

If we are faithful in telling people the Truth, the Truth of God's Word, we can expect that God will do through our witness what He did through Peter's and Paul's – reach the consciences of our contemporaries, upset their settled values and priorities, and leave them seeking a way to the new life in Jesus Christ that is freely offered to them in His Kingdom.

For reflection

1. How can you tell when something has *reached* your conscience?
2. How do you think the good conscience of a believer affects the consciences of others?
3. Why is it important, in sharing the Gospel, to try to reach the conscience of the person to whom you are witnessing?

Next steps – Preparation: Pray for the people in your Personal Mission Field, that the Lord will give you an opportunity to speak to each one about the Good News of Jesus and His Kingdom.

Referee of the Soul

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What is the conscience? Why do we say that the conscience is the *referee* of the soul?
2. What kinds of influences shape a person's conscience? How conscious are you of the influences that are shaping your conscience?
3. How do the Law and Spirit of God contribute to having a good or clean conscience?
4. What do we mean by *guarding* the conscience? What are the best ways to do this?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.