

## You And Your Conscience

By Paul S. Rees, D.D.

Herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offense toward God and toward men" (Acts 24:16).

Dr. John Homer Miller, in one of his recent books, tells us that he asked a group of "junior high" young people the question, "Do you know how to take out your conscience and look at it?" A twelve-year-old girl, her eyes big with curious surprise, said, "No", and then added eagerly, "but tell us how!"

I take it that the apostle Paul would have approved, also, of the girls appeal. "Tell us how!"

If there is a way to bring our conscience out in the light and examine it, we should know it—and use it. Mark Twain makes Huckleberry Finn say, "Sometimes a fellow's conscience takes up more room than all the rest of his insides!" What little boy has not known, as poor "Huck" came to realize, how troublesome conscience can be?

Taking a good look at conscience, what do we find?

We find that people have said some interesting, disturbing, and delightful things about it. Charles Bradlaugh, a notorious British atheist of the last century, flicked his tongue and called conscience "a spasm of the diaphragm." Which, being interpreted, means that you need not pay any more attention to it than you do to a five-minute annoyance with the hiccoughs. There is no God who gave it, even as there is none who will judge you for what you have done with it.

Far removed from Bradlaugh's bit of blasphemy is the almost ecstatic appeal of George Washington in his "Moral Maxims": "Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of the celestial called conscience."

Every reader of Shakespeare has been moved by the famous conscience passage in *Richard III*. King Richard had acted like a man without conscience, hewing his way to the throne "with the bloody axe." But the day came when the inner sentinel, never destroyed but merely stifled, cried out. That inner cry became the wracked monarch's outer cry:

"My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,  
And every tongue brings in a several tale,  
And every tale condemns me for a villain.  
Perjury, perjury, in the highest degree:  
Murder, stern murder, in the direst degree:  
All several sins, all used in each degree,  
Throng to the bar, crying all—Guilty, guilty!"

Bradlaugh, Washington, Shakespeare? Yes. But what about the Bible? Well, the truth is that the Scriptures treat conscience as a fact but never as a formula. As Morgan says, "There is no clear-cut definition of conscience in the Bible." In fact, the word is not mentioned in the Old Testament. Yet conscience is there from start to finish, pouring its praise upon every story of moral triumph, pouring its rebuke and shame upon every tale of moral defeat. From Genesis to Malachi, "All the sobs of the penitent and all the songs of the forgiven are inspired by the working of conscience."

In the New Testament you come upon the word itself—not less than twenty-nine times. There it is said to bear "witness" in the heart of man. Things are said to be done for "conscience" sake. Conscience is described as being "good," as being "pure," as being "toward God." On the other hand, it is described as being "weak," as "scared," as "defiled," as evil." And finally, as its most hopeful and heartening word, the New Testament declares that the conscience can be "cleansed."

Define it or not, you've got it—this thing called conscience. If there is in humankind an esthetic sense, enabling a man to say, "This is ugly," or "This is beautiful," then there is, even more deeply and determinately, a moral sense, enabling him to say, "This is right" or "This is wrong." Conscience, let us say, is man's capacity to react either with pleasure or with pain in response to some standard of conduct, either human or divine.

In connection with our text I want you to see, in the chapter from which it comes, and in the preceding chapter, three aspects of conscience. In chapters 23 and 24 of the Acts we find St. Paul on trial, accused by his fellow countrymen of spreading false doctrine. In the first of these chapters he is given a hearing before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem; in the second he is made to defend himself before Governor Felix at Caesarea.

Speaking before the High Priest and the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, Paul begins by saying, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day" (v. 1). Instantly the temper of the high priest flared. He ordered that Paul should be slapped on the mouth. Where-upon Paul said, "God shall smite thee, thou whited wall." Other members of the Council challenged Paul on this remark: "Revilest thou God's high priest?"

Now mark Paul's reply: "I wist not, brethren, that he was high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people" (v. 5).

What we have here, obviously, is the tender conscience. Paul was fully persuaded of the rightness of his case. He was just as persuaded of the injustice, the cruelty, and the hypocrisy of the man who had ordered him to be struck in the face. Yet he felt that in his failure to give more honor to the title of the high priest, if not to his person, he had acted wrongly and was therefore regretful.

By a tender conscience we mean one that is responsive. It is neither dull nor dead. It has not been "seared," literally, "branded with a hot iron," to use Paul's phrase in I Timothy 4:2. It is increasingly responsive, moreover, on high levels. Some of us know that our conscience would kick up a big fuss within us if we were to contemplate the murder of a man. Yet we have no qualms about belittling his name and reputation with our careless tongues. More sensitiveness is needed.

Some of us get disgusted and feel outraged because we hear of "deep freezers," "mink coats," "five percenters," and "influence peddlers" in Washington. Yet we seem not to care at all about the real trouble that underlies all of these incidents of graft and crookedness at the nation's capital, the real culprit being the aggressiveness of farmer blocs, and labor blocs, and big industry blocs, each trying to outdo the other in putting the pressure on the government to grant it certain favors. Citizens who are hogs at home should not be surprised if they find pork barrels in Congress.

The other day a friend of mine gave me a package containing a powder which he said would tenderize the toughest steaks. What a lot of us need is a tenderizer for our conscience.

But, having said that, I should say that in pleading for a tender conscience I am not pleading for one that is supersensitive. A monitoring conscience is an asset, a morbid conscience is a liability.

Sometimes this condition takes the form of an unwillingness to give up guilt even when all the means of dealing with it, both human and divine, have been exhaust-