

ed. Here is a man whose past holds a very real piece of wrong. He has repented of it, made confession of it, and, within the limits of what is possible, has made restitution for it. He has prayed for God's mercy and forgiveness. Yet his conscience will not let go, so to speak. It continues to nag, torment, and haunt him, torturing his nights with dark memories, troubling his days with endless self-condemnation. This man has to be shown, through patient counseling, that his conscience had performed a real service when it made him aware of his sin, but that it is now acting far beyond its normal province when it insists on his continued guilt. He has to see that it is time for him to breathe God's fresh air of pardon, and to exclaim with the Psalmist, "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Psa. 32:1).

Yes, if there is danger in having an understimulated conscience, there is danger, too, in having one that is over-stimulated. What we find so wholesomely displayed in the man Paul is a Christianized sense of right and wrong that is neither calloused on the one hand nor over-scrupulous on the other—just tender.

We shall return to Paul in a moment, but first let us look at this man Felix, the governor to whom Paul is speaking when he says, "Herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offense toward God, and toward men."

Who was Felix? He was a slave who had managed to gain his freedom and rise to power on a staircase of cunning, lust, and barbarous cruelty. Tacitus, the Roman historian, said of him, "Through all cruelty and licentiousness he exercised the authority of a king with the spirit of a slave." At the time Paul stood in his presence, Felix was living in open and unblushing adultery with Drusilla.

Knowing all this, the apostle laid aside his own testimony as to the charges against him and, thinking of Felix's soul, he "reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come" (v. 25). It was as though all the hell in Felix's life suddenly erupted and the evil of it flowed out to fill him with fear and horror. So we read that, as Paul preached, "Felix trembled." In the end he said, "Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee." Here we have the terrified conscience.

The terrified conscience is the conscience haunted by guilt. It is the moral sense within us disregarded, insulted, suppressed—until something occurs to release its pent-up power.

Recently, at the close of an address I had to give in an Ohio city, I had the joy of renewing acquaintance with a minister I had not seen for several years. Some years ago, at the close of one of his sermons, a married couple came to him for spiritual help. They found no release or rest of soul. They came again. They came a third time. This time the young husband, in deep agony, groaned, "I must tell it! I must tell it!" The confession he made, for himself and his wife, was followed by a journey to their own home where they tore up some boards and unearthed the remains of their own unwanted baby.

Conscience, let us never forget, can be a watch-dog or a bloodhound, depending on whether we regard it or disregard it.

And now we come to the third aspect of conscience that we meet in connection with our text. It is to be seen in the text itself: "Herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offense toward God, and toward men." "I always take pains to have a clear conscience," is the more direct and simple rendering of the Revised Standard Version.

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Here we have the trained conscience. Paul's testimony makes it plain that a Christian conscience is the result of the right kind of training, of exercise, of growth.

The moment we see this important point we are ready to listen to a few very necessary corrections of false notions which people have about conscience.

For one thing, it needs to be said emphatically that conscience is not necessarily the voice of God. It is the gift of God, to be sure. Furthermore, it represents our capacity for hearing the voice of God. But its voice may be the voice of the devil, or the voice of social custom, or the voice of self.

When leading Nazis who survived the defeat of Germany were brought to trial for high crimes, among them was a doctor who testified that it was with a clear conscience he had ordered the mass murder of hundreds of sick, diseased, and undernourished people. He explained that he was acting according to a philosophy he and other Nazis had adopted, namely, that just as trees and shrubs are pruned of the dead and dying branches, so human society should be pruned of its unfits and misfits. He claimed to be conscientious. Was his conscience the voice of God? Let him believe it who can!

It needs to be said, further, that conscience is not a safe, certainly not an infallible, guide. The only infallible thing about conscience is its siding in with what you believe to be right and its siding against what you believe to be wrong. But what you believe depends, not upon your conscience, but upon the sources of your ideals, your standards, and your convictions.

Your conscience is somewhat like your watch. You trust your watch, but not blindly. Every now and then you test its accuracy by the time signal on your radio or by the clock in the jeweler's window. But even the Western Union clocks have to be tested by a master chronometer. That chronometer has to be tested by Greenwich in England. And Greenwich is tested by the stars. So that all time-pieces are adjusted, finally, by the heavens.

Take out your conscience and look at it. Test it. You say, How? By the highest that you know. If you had a Hindu conscience, your standards for testing would be taken from a system of deities in which some of the gods demand for their appeasement that you cast your child into the river where crocodiles await it with ravening cruelty. If yours were a savage conscience in Africa, you would test it by standards set up by the witch doctor, and horrible rites would claim your superstitious reverence.

But you profess to be a Christian. Then the mind and spirit and teaching of Jesus Christ provide the standard by which you may test and train your conscience.

For this training and discipline you and I need at least three things, and we need them all the time. We need the Bible, and especially the New Testament. We need the fellowship of the church, to keep us sharp and clear in our spiritual discernment and loyal in our convictions and conduct. We need prayer, in which the Spirit of God can reach the innermost sanctuary of our soul with His light and His leading.

He who says, "I'll let my conscience be my guide," is never safe. He is safe only as he adds, "And I'll let Christ be the Lord of my conscience." Only so can we hope to have a "conscience void of offense toward God, and toward man."

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The true man of God never puts first things second, and he never ceases to remember it is only in Christ's presence that there is fulness of joy, and only at His right hand that there are pleasures for evermore.

Henry W. Frost