

3. Chapters 5–6 explain how you should relate to other people when your consciences disagree.

We wrote this book because we feel so deeply that people today need clear and accurate answers to these questions. Not only do people *need* them; they *want* them. We've had many opportunities to preach, teach, and counsel about the conscience in many different venues to many different kinds of Christians, and in our experience, people love to learn about the conscience because it helps them practically.

We pray that God will use this book to educate you in how to handle your conscience for his eternal glory and your eternal good.

Christian, meet Conscience.

I

WHAT IS CONSCIENCE?

Most people probably think of the conscience as the “shoulder angel.” Comic strips and films often depict an angel dressed in white on a person’s right shoulder and a demon dressed in red and holding a pitchfork on the person’s left shoulder (see figure 1). The angel represents the person’s conscience, and the demon represents temptation. The angel attempts to persuade the person to do right, and the demon tempts the person to do wrong.

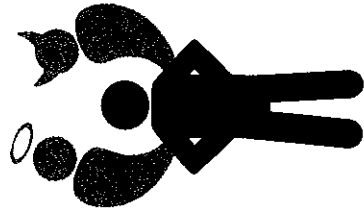


Figure 1. Shoulder angel vs. shoulder demon

This picture resonates with people because we commonly experience internal conflicts that seem like voices in our heads arguing about what to do in a particular situation. What is right? What is wrong? Thankfully, we're not left to popular perception in regard to conscience. We have the Bible to teach us what conscience is and is not. In chapter 2 we'll attempt to define conscience from the Bible. But first we want to lay out some introductory principles about conscience, principles that we'll unpack throughout the rest of the book. Most of them are pretty obvious, but it's possible that you haven't thought much about them.

Conscience Is a Human Capacity

To be human is to have a conscience. Animals don't have a conscience, even if they often seem to. I (J. D.) have a dog, Lucy, whose tail is almost permanently fixed between her legs, her eyes always averted, always guilty. We think she was mistreated as a puppy. But in spite of all appearances, Lucy doesn't have a conscience—not even the trace of one. She doesn't have a conscience because she doesn't have the capacity for moral judgment. Our cat doesn't have a conscience either, but you already knew that.

Notice we said conscience is a *capacity*. Like other human capacities such as speech and reason, it's possible for a person never to actualize or achieve the capacity of conscience. A child dies in infancy, having never spoken a single word or felt a single pang of conscience. Another child is born without the mental capacity to make moral judgments. Others, through stroke, accident, or dementia, lose the moral judgment they once had and the conscience that went with it. Still, to be human is to have the *capacity* for conscience, whether or not one is able to exercise that capacity.

Conscience Reflects the Moral Aspect of God's Image

It shouldn't surprise you that you have a conscience. You're made in the image of God, and God is a moral God, so you must be a moral creature who makes moral judgments. And what is conscience if not shining the spotlight of your moral judgment back on yourself, your thoughts, and your actions. A moral being would expect to make moral self-judgments.

So conscience is inherent in personhood. It is not the result of sin. It is not something that Christians will lose after God glorifies them. This means that Jesus, who is fully human, has a conscience. Unlike our consciences, though, Jesus's conscience perfectly matches God's will, and he has never sinned against it.

Conscience Feels Independent

But what ought to surprise you is that you would even care about the verdict of your conscience. Yet you do care, intensely. Many have taken their lives because of a secret guilt—a sin that no one else knew except that impossible-to-suppress voice within. Others have gone mad from the telltale heartbeat of a guilty conscience.

But when you think about it, why should you care what your conscience says about you? If you heard that a judge accused of a crime had decided to hear his own case, you'd laugh. First he sits on the bench and reads the charges. Then he jumps down to the witness stand to defend himself and then jumps back up to the bench to pronounce himself "not guilty." What a joke! And yet you judge yourself every day, and it doesn't feel like a joke. It's deadly serious. Why?

The *why* is a great mystery. No one knows why the conscience feels so much like an independent third party, but it probably has something to do with the relationship between

two universal realities that Paul discusses in Romans chapters 1 and 2. Romans 1:19–20 claims that all humans know intuitively by the witness of nature that God exists and must be absolutely powerful. Romans 2:14–15 goes on to teach that everyone also has a conscience, an imperfect-but-accurate-enough version of God's will, as standard equipment in their hearts. Then verse 16 makes a link between the conscience and the day of judgment. Listen to these two passages side by side:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. (Rom. 1:19–20)

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Rom. 2:14–16)

Put together, these passages seem to explain conscience like this: though we all have a sense that what's going on in our conscience is secret, we also have a sense that an all-powerful, all-knowing God is in on the secret and will someday judge those secrets at his great and terrifying tribunal. We're not saying that people actually reason it out like a syllogism but that all of us intuit very strongly our accountability to an all-powerful, all-knowing God, even if we suppress that intuition, as Romans 1:18 claims. Perhaps that is why the voice of conscience

seems so much like an independent judge rather than a kangaroo court.

Conscience Is a Priceless Gift from God

The conscience is a gift for your good and joy, and it is something that God—not your mother or father or anyone else—gave you.

Consider your sense of touch. That sense is a gift from God that can function as a warning system to save you from great harm. If the tip of your finger lightly brushes the top of a hot stove, your nervous system reflexively compels you to pull back your hand to avoid more pain and harm. Similarly, the guilt that your conscience makes you feel should lead you to turn from your sin to Jesus. God gave you that sense of guilt for your good.

The conscience is also a gift from God for your joy: “*Blessed* is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves” (Rom. 14:22b). Like everyone else, you long to be “blessed” or happy. That’s how God wired you. The ultimate way to nourish this longing is to satisfy it with the deepest and most enduring happiness, God himself, and then share that deep joy with others by loving them. Your chief end is to glorify God *by* enjoying him forever.¹ You can intensify that satisfying pursuit if you understand that your conscience is a priceless gift from God, learn how it works, and then cultivate it so that you can love others.

Conscience Wants to Be an On-Off Switch, Not a Dimmer

Conscience is all about right or wrong, black or white. It doesn’t do gray scale very well. It doesn’t nuance. It doesn’t say, “It’s complicated.” It leads your thoughts to either “accuse

¹We are paraphrasing John Piper’s definition of what he calls “Christian hedonism.” See especially John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, 3rd ed. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003), 28.

or even excuse" (Rom. 2:15), to pronounce guilt or innocence. Because conscience wants to make such stark pronouncements, it is of utmost importance that you align your personal conscience standards with what God considers right and wrong, not just with human opinion. Otherwise, your conscience will pronounce guilty verdicts on matters of mere opinion.

Your Conscience Is for You and You Only

Conscience is personal. It is *your* conscience.² It is intended for you and not for someone else. And the conscience of others belongs to them and not you. You cannot, must not, force others to adopt your conscience standards. MYOC. Mind your own conscience. Accepting this one principle would solve a large percentage of relationship problems inside and outside the church. (More on this in chapter 5.)

No Two People Have Exactly the Same Conscience

If everyone had the same conscience standards, we wouldn't need passages like Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, which teach people with differing consciences how to get along in their church. Let's use the triangles in figure 2 to compare the consciences of two Christians, Anne and Bill.³ The letters in the triangles stand for various rules of right and wrong. Though not identical, Anne and Bill's consciences overlap significantly in what they view as right and wrong (C, D, E, F, and dozens of other rules). In fact, people usually agree much more in matters of conscience than they disagree.

²Gary T. Meadors defines *conscience* as "an aspect of self-awareness that produces the pain and/or pleasure we 'feel' as we reflect on the norms and values we recognize and apply. Conscience is not an outside voice. It is an inward capacity humans possess to critique themselves because the Creator provided this process as a means of moral restraint for his creation." "Conscience," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 115.

³The triangles on conscience in this section are adapted from Bob Priest. See especially Robert J. Priest, "Missionary Elencics: Conscience and Culture," *Missionology: An International Review* 22, no. 3 (1994): 291-315.

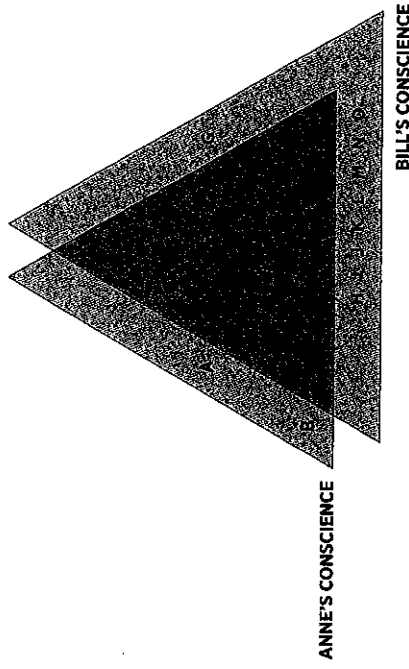


Figure 2. Two consciences

Notice, however, that Bill's conscience has more rules than Anne's (rules G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O). Anne sees Bill assiduously following these unnecessary rules, such as staying away from movie theaters and never playing video games, and she rolls her eyes at such "legalism." All the while, Bill is shocked that Anne can ignore these "obvious" commandments and still call herself a Christian. But Bill isn't the only one being self-righteous. Anne sees that Bill is completely oblivious to rule B and says to another friend, "Do you know that Bill buys non-fair-trade coffee? Doesn't he care about downtrodden workers in South America?" Differences in conscience cause a significant percentage of conflicts in any church.

No One's Conscience Perfectly Matches God's Will

Of course, we all tend to assume that our own conscience standards line up with God's will. Returning to our example of Anne and Bill, figure 3 superimposes God's righteous will over their consciences.

It turns out that neither Anne's nor Bill's conscience perfectly

How can you discern between your conscience and the Holy Spirit? You can't know infallibly. But you can know when it is *not* the Holy Spirit: if the message contradicts Scripture, then it is not from the Holy Spirit but from your wrongly calibrated conscience. But when the message is consistent with Scripture, the Holy Spirit is likely working *through* your conscience.

(Of course, as long as Bill considers H, I, J, K, etc. to be truly wrong actions for him, he'll need to obey his conscience in those areas, even if Scripture is silent. Say, for example, that rule H is "Don't use unfiltered Internet." As long as Bill believes God morally requires this rule for him, he must follow it. But as he understands more about conscience, he will see that he can't force Anne to agree that God has made this rule a hard-and-fast commandment for all believers. Eventually, Bill will see that rule H is not truly a commandment from God at all but an issue of wisdom.)

matches God's will. No person's conscience does. Let this truth sink deep into your heart.

Anne needs to realize that buying non-fair-trade coffee (rule B) turns out *not* to be a sin before God, and Bill needs to understand that rules H, I, J, K, L, M, N, and O—including going to the theater and playing video games—are not inherent sins in God's sight. However, Anne better be thinking a whole lot more about rule G since God cares about it. And notice that Bill is wrong to omit rule A from his conscience. And they're both off about P, which doesn't show up on either of their radars. But God thinks it should!

As we come to understand God's revealed will more and more, we will have opportunities to add rules to our conscience that God's Word clearly teaches and weed out rules that God's Word treats as optional. This will take a lifetime, but we have the Spirit of God, the Word of God, and the church of God to help us.

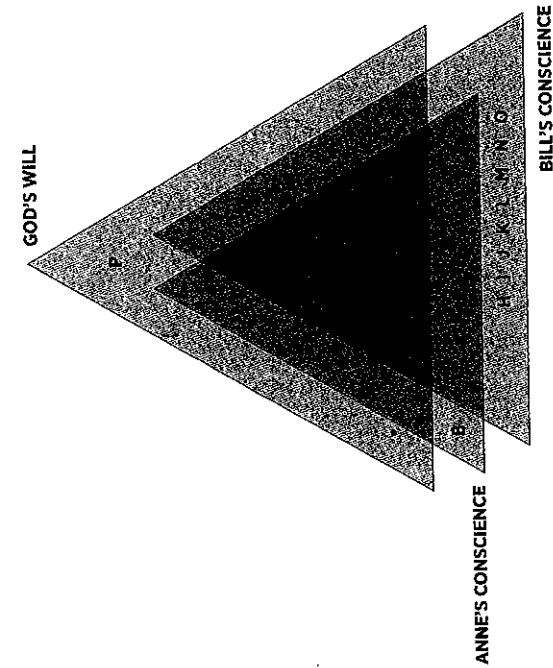


Figure 3. Human conscience and God's standards

You Can Damage Your Conscience

You can damage the gift of conscience, just as you can damage other gifts from God. Oddly enough, you can damage it in two opposite ways: by making it insensitive and by making it oversensitive.

We make conscience *insensitive* by developing a habit of ignoring its voice of warning so that the voice gets weaker and weaker and finally disappears. Paul calls this "searing" the conscience: "Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron" (1 Tim. 4:2 NIV).

We make conscience *oversensitive* by packing it with too many rules that are actually matters of opinion, not right and wrong. Oddly enough, both kinds of damage to conscience can occur in the same person. After Paul described the conscience of false teachers as "seared," he went on to say that those same false teachers also imposed strict and unnecessary scruples

about abstinence from food and marriage (1 Tim. 4:3). Jesus made the same connection between a seared conscience and an oversensitive conscience when he accused the Pharisees of scrupulously straining out gnats but then swallowing camels (Matt. 23:24), even the camel of murdering the Son of God.

This may explain why a generation ago in some parts of America, very strict churches were extremely careful about many minor issues that they perceived were right and wrong, but the same churches also trained their deacons to guard the church doors and keep out blacks. Talk about "neglect[ing] the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness" (Matt. 23:23)! Talk about choking on camels!

The Two Great Principles of Conscience

Of all the principles related to conscience, two rise to the top: (1) God is the only Lord of conscience, and (2) you should always obey your conscience. These two principles come up repeatedly in this book and in your life. We'll look at the second principle first because it's the most obvious.

Principle 2: Obey It!

Even unbelievers sense deep in their hearts the importance of obeying conscience. The Bible teaches in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 that to go against your conscience when you think it's warning you correctly is *always* a sin in God's eyes. Always. Even if the action is not a sin in and of itself. Why? Because your intention is to sin. But does this mean your conscience is always correct? No. And this brings us to the first principle of conscience.

Principle 1: God Is the Only Lord of Conscience

Like the "one ring to rule them all," this conscience principle governs all the rest. Your conscience is not the lord of itself—

that's idolatry. You are not the lord of your conscience. Your parents are not the lord of your conscience (though you do well to obey them when under their care). Your pastors are not the lord of your conscience (though they care for your soul, and you would be foolish to disregard their counsel). Fellow believers are not the lord of your conscience. God is the only Lord of conscience.

This means that the second principle (obey conscience) has one critical limitation. If God, the Lord of your conscience, shows you through his Word that your conscience is registering a mistaken moral judgment and if you believe he wants you to adjust your conscience to better match his will, your conscience must bend to God. Do you remember the principle, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29)? That holds true even when the "man" happens to be you! You must God rather than yourself. You must obey God rather than your conscience. If your conscience is so sacrosanct that it's off-limits even to God, that's idolatry. For example, had Peter decided to listen to his conscience instead of to God when God told him to "kill and eat!" (and, by extension, to receive Gentiles into his home), he would have committed a serious sin (Acts 10:9-16). Whenever "obey conscience!" collides with "obey God!" "obey God!" must come out on top—every time. Thankfully, a Christian with a well-calibrated conscience will rarely have to make this choice.

We promised that we would attempt to leave no *conscience* verse unturned. God is far from silent on the subject of conscience, so now it's time to look at each of the thirty occurrences of the Greek word for *conscience* in the New Testament to come up with a biblical definition.