

Conscience and Christianity

by Amos S. Hayden

The sermon explores the importance of conscience in Christianity, its role in salvation, and how it can be developed and cultivated.

Scripture: Matthew 1:21

Topics: "Divine Salvation", "Eternal Justice"

Description

A.S. Hayden preaches about the importance of salvation, Divine grace, and repentance in the New Testament, emphasizing the grand and glorious salvation offered by Jesus Christ to save people from their sins. Hayden highlights the boundless benevolence and surpassing love of God, manifested through the Gospel, which ignites supernatural benevolence in believers. Additionally, Hayden delves into the concept of justice in the Christian religion, portraying it as an eternal righteousness where justice and mercy meet in the work of redemption, ultimately revealing God's infinite wisdom and glory.

Transcript

"Which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing, or else excusing one another."--ROMANS II: 15.

HE New Testament reveals a grand and glorious salvation. The angel that announced the birth of the Lord Jesus announced him as a Savior: "He shall save his people from their sins." (Matt. i: 21.) The Divine grace is poured forth, in boundless profusion, "to purge our sins"--to recover us, absolutely and eternally, from our ruin in depravity and guilt. Salvation is the herald-note of the Gospel--its voice of proclamation to the whole human family. This is the burden of the apostolic mission. Repentance and remission, in the name of the crucified, exalted Prince and Savior, were, through the obedience of the Gospel, to be brought to every son and daughter of a lost and ruined race. He who studies the Christian religion, therefore, must, first of all, contemplate it as a great salvation.

But it is also a boundless benevolence--full and free, and surpassing all utterance. This thought is itself the result and outflow from another which lies above and back of it as its cause--the Divine philanthropy. "God so [497] loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John iii: 16.) God so loved. This speech "so loved" admits of no degree above it. It is the highest form of speech--the superlative of superlatives. No conception of philanthropy can transcend this. Angelic powers could rise no higher. The humblest saint is equal--in enjoyment, is superior--to the highest seraph, in respect to this unparalleled and unlimited benevolence. The Gospel,

issuing from this full fountain of goodness, begets in all who receive it the like emotion; so that the work of redemption is not complete in us even when we have heartily embraced it, and secured to ourselves the possession and enjoyment of the great salvation. It works in us to kindle the fires of that supernatural benevolence which sought and found a way to rescue and glorify lost man. The saved sinner will feel after his lost brother till he find him; and, having found him, he will exclaim, with one of old: "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and all the prophets did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." (John i: 45.) The second, perhaps the higher, study of the Christian religion, is the view of it as a grand and superlative philanthropy.

But the third--the grandest, the highest--is its justice. It is an eternal, an inexorable righteousness. "Mercy and truth go before the face of the Almighty, but justice and judgment are the habitation of his throne." (Psalms lxxxix: 14..) In the unfolding of his character in the work of redemption, justice and mercy meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other. (See Psalms lxxxv: 10.) The union of these ineffable attributes is the highest thought in the revelation which God has made to man. To realize and embody it in the work of redemption is the richest and [498] loftiest display of infinite wisdom. The oracle which reveals Jesus Christ as a priest on a throne unfolds more fully than any other the counsels which originated man's recovery. It sets him forth in the highest possible glory, combining the royalty with the priesthood--a kingly priest, a sacerdotal monarch, ruling the universe in reference to the salvation of the human race. Consider attentively the whole passage: "He shall bear the glory; and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both." (Zech. vi: 13.) Peace to the soul comes from both the royalty and the priesthood. Both offices are united in him who bears the glory, and who sits and rules, a priest, upon his throne.

Now, CONSCIENCE discerns the right. Without this power, or faculty, man would be incapable of any discernment of moral rectitude. Conscience is the moral eye of the soul--an eye single to righteousness. Then the connection-level between God and man is where conscience apprehends God's righteousness. The Gospel, as a system of justification, reveals God's righteousness--that is, his system of justification--through and by the cross. And it is no less its purpose to establish God's righteousness, while he stoops to recover and save the sinner, than it is to bring salvation to man, who is justly condemned in his sins. It deserves emphatic mention, that the completeness of the work of salvation is not accomplished until the conscience sees the Divine justice displayed equally with God's mercy, and feels satisfied in the glorious work of restoring sinful man to a state of pardon, acceptance, and holiness. Then the justified sinner rests, for he is reconciled. Then he is satisfied, for he sees the ground of immutable security in the justice of God--the very [499] foundation of his throne. Then he can understand that justice, as well as mercy, is his friend, and offers him pardon. Accordingly, the holy apostle says: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John i: 9.)

We see that conscience is the link of communion between man and God in the highest development of the Christian religion. It is the avenue through which flow into the soul all the high, reconciling, and exalting sentiments which are awakened by God's Justice, holiness, and truth--powers which secure to the soul its firmest trust, and kindle to flames the feelings of praise, devotion, and adoration.

Nature and Subordinate Position of Conscience.

Conscience is neither innate, in the sense of a perfect guide of itself--an image or representative of God in the soul--as some imagine, to prompt and guide, always infallibly, in the right way; nor yet is it the "creature of education"--an expression very faulty, and of uncertain sound. In respect of the first position,

those who believe in innate total depravity can not believe it; for then would there be at least one power or faculty, and that a moral power, which, so far from being totally depraved, would not be depraved at all! Nor can any reflecting person believe it, who considers the infinitely differing and conflicting decisions which conscience, as a judge, is making in precisely the same cases. And in respect to the second position, that conscience is the creature of education, it may be sufficient to remark, that education creates no faculty. There must be some thing to be educated before education can commence its work. It is time this loose style of speech were abandoned. [500]

Conscience, then, is a faculty or power among the original endowments implanted in us by the Creator; not to take the place of God in the heart, but it rejoices in its dependency, and looks up with reverential humility for the word and will of God to prompt all its impulses and guide in all its decisions. No one of all our faculties is so prompt as conscience, when in a healthy state, to respond to the Divine appeals, and to say, in the language of Samuel, "Speak, for thy servant heareth." More than this, it seems to be intrusted with a subordinate dominion, a viceroyalty, to summon to duty the whole garrison of our moral powers, to keep them in the line, armed and equipped, ready for defense, or for invasion upon the enemies of the Supreme Sovereign.

Conscience is an eye; but the eye needs light. The best eye discerns nothing in darkness. Conscience without a guide is Sampson without eyes. It must be led; it wants a hand to lead it to the pillars. There is no clearer example of the confusion yet prevailing in Christendom, than is found in the strangely inconsistent views entertained on the question of the supremacy of conscience. While it is a faculty in our nature, like all other faculties in man, it needs illumination. Or, to accept the definition which Locke gives of conscience, "The power of judging of the rectitude or the pravity of our own actions," it is still manifest that, as rectitude has respect to right rule, and pravity implies a departure from one, conscience needs a rule, or standard of judgment. If she "accuses," her accusation must rest on fact and law. If she "witnesses," her testimony relates to conformity to a right rule, or to dereliction and disobedience. The conclusion is plain, that there must be a rule or standard for every act of conscience. [501]

The Romanist has his rule of conscience--the creed and practices of the Romish Church. Compliance with that rule satisfies his conscience. But the Greek Christian's conscience would never be satisfied with the Romish rule. The Musselman's conscience conforms to the Koran. Thus consciences differ as the standards differ throughout the multiform variety of rules which men have adopted. As--

"Education forms the common mind,"

so, in a very emphatic sense, the religious teaching which a man adopts becomes, invariably, his conscience-standard.

It is assumed throughout this discourse, and ought to be, doubtless, in all sound reasoning, that while conscience is the supreme moral guide in us, its dictates and decisions are neither different from the light we possess, nor beyond it. A good conscience, in the sense of one faithful to its moral convictions, will act unflinchingly in harmony with the moral bias of its possessor. From these reasonings the following propositions appear to flow:

1. Conscience reflects, or uses executively, the degree and character of instruction the possessor of it has received.
2. If his teaching be erroneous, conscience will be tainted with the same error, and to the same extent.

3. If the instruction be from the Word of God, it will be correct, and conscience will give a correct testimony.

4. Conscience is not an infallible guide, unless it be infallibly led.

S. But the Divine revelation is such an infallible guide, by which the conscience, when duly instructed, is infallibly led; which, in turn, leads man infallibly by the knowledge of God. [502]

Conscience belongs only to Man.

While it is the highest of our faculties, linking us to the Creator through the highest display of his revelation, his eternal holiness, it is worthy of special remark, that conscience is a faculty which pertains to man alone. Some of the lower orders of animals seem to share with him in at least a semblance of the intellectual powers, as also in some of the moral qualities possessed by men. Some of them manifest a degree of fidelity in their attachment very touching and almost human. Some of the knowing capacities appear, in measure, to shine among some of them. But while there is an overlapping of certain affections and capacities between man and the irrational creation, it is apparent that those affections and capacities are possessed in the strongest degree which are of the lower grade. As we rise in the scale, as respects the nature of the qualities thus mutually possessed, they become dim and weak in them, till man is left alone in the supremacy and enjoyment of all the higher grade. Animals have strong affections--a mere dim reflection of intellect--and no conscience. Thus it is equally shown that man is supreme in excellence on the earth; and also that conscience is supreme among and over all the grand endowments implanted in us by the Creator.

It is man's moral personality--without it, no moral character. As is his conscience, so is his character. Character and conscience are correlates. The one is the embodiment of the other. Conscience forms character, and character is the index of conscience. Men differ, all things considered, in moral character, according to the differences in their consciences. Here is the point of observation from which to study the pictures men are making. Every man assumes [503] his own attitude and position--works on the canvas from his own angle. He colors and shades according to the moral hue and force of his conscience. Whatever else enters into the dye wherein he dips his brush, conscience is the background, shading all, setting all in prominence or relief.

Susceptibility of Cultivation.

Conscience is susceptible of greater cultivation--than any other of our powers. It is also capable of a greater degree of depravity. In this man is equal unto the angels, and a companion also of demons. Delectable above all things of beauty is a well-educated and upright conscience, ruling like an empress, and regulating with equity and prudence the whole empire of the soul. Here is perfection--the only perfection of which man is capable. Every intellectual power and moral quality in his nature is susceptible of indefinite, almost limitless, improvement; but this alone may reach absolute perfection. Conscience may prompt perfect obedience to a perfect law, for conscience, like an architect, works by rule; but the power to obey may be far in the rear of the perfect intention. Here a conflict ensues between the demands of the will, which requires perfect obedience, and the tardy passions, which are untrained and rebellious. Conscience mourns to find the obedience so far behind her standard. She rallies her forces, chides delays, reproves, admonishes, and tries every means to bring the recusant "members" to duty. Sometimes she makes us cry out in despair: "O, wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" This was her forlorn hope all along under the law. Thus do we understand Paul in the

seventh chapter of Romans: "For to will is present with me, but how to perform that [504] which is good I find not." Conscience sought and prompted the right way. It was good in its impulse and decision; but the power to control the refractory members, the aid to the obedience it demanded, was not in the law. But when the needed aid appeared, the Gospel, with its blessed hope, its cheerful and free spirit, its assurance of pardon, and its gracious mercy, the relieved conscience exultingly exclaimed: "Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Rom. vii: 24, 25.)

The Court of Conscience.

The offices of conscience appear, in the light of the Holy Scriptures, to be summarily as follows:

1. It acts as an accuser." Being convicted by their conscience, they went out one by one." (John viii: 9.)
2. It is a witness. "Their conscience also bearing witness." (Rom. ii: 15.) Also (chapter ix: 1), "My conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost." "Our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience." (2 Cor. i: 12.)
3. It is a judge or arbitrator in morals. "Why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience." (1 Cor. x: 29.) "Commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." (2 Cor. iv: 2.) See also 1 John iii: 20, where, under another term, the same notion of an arbitrator among our moral powers is distinctly asserted: "If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things."

The word of God speaks of a "good conscience." That is good which fully and constantly answers the ends of its creation. The conscience that is healthy and vigorous, acting spontaneously and without bias, receiving no [505] bribe--which is tender, quick, and true--is a good conscience.

There is, also, an evil conscience. A conscience is evil when it refuses service, or is incapable of duty; or when it has been trifled with till it has become callous and past feeling. Of some, it is said their conscience is seared as with a hot iron. The flesh, when thus seared, is insensate. This is a strong figure, and of easy understanding in its application to the conscience. It has lost its sensibility. It no longer files in its accusation. It no longer arbitrates in the great questions of duty. Such persons are hopelessly lost, as it is only through the conscience the soul can be reached.

A conscience may be weak, and yet good. It may be watchful--even over-careful to avoid the wrong. Its tension may be high through mere delicacy. Such a conscience demands the tenderest treatment. No greater mistake, or more painfully serious in its consequences, is committed by pastors and elders of churches, than to disregard the cases under their care of overwrought tenderness of conscience. Some of the purest and most delicate souls--of highest and acutest sensitiveness, yet sincere to the last degree--are bluntly addressed and coarsely treated by persons incapable of appreciating them. They languish for relief on some troublesome case of duty omitted, or some act performed. They sigh in darkness, and long for some one to whom they may commit freely their troubles. Here, thou spiritual adviser, here be thy skill displayed. To trifle here is to ruin a soul. The slightest contempt may sink their remaining hope immeasurable fathoms down into the depths of the most dismal despair. It is painfully certain that this class of scrupulous sufferers are in most [506] of the churches, and none with eye to discern, heart to appreciate, or tongue to relieve them.

An evil conscience also exists when its possessor feels a sense of unpardoned guilt. It differs from a defiled conscience. An evil conscience, in the sense here considered, carries the conviction of guilt. It is

penitent, but unpardoned. A defiled conscience is corrupt, impure, impenitent. A pure conscience is free from the consciousness of sins cherished. A good conscience, as here spoken of, is free from a sense of guilt.

Here a distinction of great importance may be mentioned between the change of heart and the forgiveness of sins--two states of the heart, or conscience (for sometimes these terms may be used interchangeably) which are frequently confounded. When the heart is changed, the conscience is purged from defilement; the heart is purified of its love of sin; it delights in holiness; and in its reconciliation it cries out, with Saul, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" The conscience is now pure. It longs for the pardon of the sins which it now mourns. In other words, to that state of heart, correctly termed a pure conscience, is now to be added the joy of that state called in Scripture a good conscience--one made free from guilt by forgiveness. Then a change of heart prepares the sinner for pardon; and the knowledge of pardon, obtained in obedience to the Gospel, clothes him with a good conscience, "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

A few passages of the Holy Scripture, considered together, throw much light on this part of the subject. We introduce merely the sentences to be considered, requesting the reader to examine them carefully in their connection. [507]

Hebrew ix: 14: "Purge your conscience from dead works."

Hebrew x: 2: "Worshippers once purged should have no more conscience of sins."

Hebrew x: 22: "Hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience."

1 Peter iii: 21: "Answer of a good conscience."

From a careful study and comparison of these passages, the following remarks appear to be plain and pertinent:

1st. An evil conscience is one that feels the sense of guilt. The worshippers under the law were never relieved of that burden. Paul argues that if they had enjoyed that freedom from sin their offerings would not have been repeated. (Heb. x: 2.) And, from verse 22, we learn that the relief, or sense of pardon which they sought, and for which the offerings of the law were inadequate, was gained through the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ; and that unpardoned state of heart is there called an "evil conscience." Then, an evil conscience is a guilty conscience; and a good conscience is one which has been relieved from that guilt by a knowledge of pardon.

2d. That the law was unable to confer that blessing. "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." "Every priest standeth daily ministering, and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never make the comers thereunto perfect as pertaineth to the conscience." "The worshippers once purged should have no more conscience of sins." (Heb. x.) Then the unspeakable joy of sins forgiven, a conscience which witnessed to its possessor to the act of forgiving mercy, which pronounced a full and formal absolution from the guilt of sin, was a blessing to which the Jewish heart was a stranger--a blessing enjoyed only by the sons of God under [508] Jesus Christ. And hence the accompanying spirit of adoption belongs, as Paul shows extensively elsewhere, only to Christians, to the members of the new covenant.

3d. That what the law could not do in this respect, the Gospel of Jesus Christ doth fully and happily accomplish. "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the Eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God." (Heb. ix: 14.) "Let us draw near to God with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, having our heart sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water." (Heb. x: 22.) This forgiveness is neither typical nor formal, merely, but actual; so that the worshipers, once purged, have no more conscience of sins. And the consequence of this blessing is the enjoyment of the Holy Spirit, which, as sons of God, we now receive; being, adopted as the sons and daughters of a Holy Father. And thus we become the adopted brothers of the "only-begotten Son," and share the honors and joys of the Divine family. Christians should, then, not go mourning all their days, but lift up their heads and rejoice in hope, and be careful to walk worthy of the vocation with which they are called.

4th. That this sense of relief, or knowledge of pardon, is conveyed intentionally and formally to the converted sinner in baptism, through the promise which the merciful Savior vouchsafes to those who obey him. Thus the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ and the washing of the body in pure water are associated. (Heb. x: 22.) And the seeking of a good conscience and baptism are connected for the same purpose, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who bore our sins in his own body on the tree, and who rose the third day for our justification. [509]

The Freedom of the Conscience.

The language of the Apostle Paul may be justly adopted and applied here: "I am free from all men." And again: "Not without law to God." This expresses accurately, and with high authority, the nature of the freedom which of right belongs to the conscience. It is too sacred for man to interfere with. It is man's own moral personality. Into this sanctuary he retires to settle his accounts with his God, and prepare for the judgment; a business too awful and too peculiarly his own to admit of any intermeddling from without. A "hitherto shalt thou come, and no farther," peremptorily forbids the approach of any third party.

Of very necessity, and of its own inalienable right, the conscience is and must be free. The moment it is coerced or compelled, it is destroyed. No indignity so great can be offered to human nature. The surrender of this right is the surrender of our highest manhood, and the holiest prerogative of our nature. Half the wars, revolutions, and convulsions of society have come from the exacting and unnatural attempts of some power in accidental supremacy to dictate law to the conscience. Bless God for the liberation of men from the terrors of the auto da fé, the impious cruelties of the Star Chamber, and the awful and diabolical tyrannies of the Inquisition. The sufferings of the million, who, dying in prison, in exile, or by torture, are the impressive and emphatic protest of God's martyr host against the enormous wrong.

"No martyrs now!" Not quite, perhaps, but nearly. Read with inward thought. The church requires its pastor to preach the prevailing "doctrines" embodied in its compend of the faith. He failing in the imposed obligation, [510] they place him under the ban of silence, cut off supplies from his table, or make him so uncomfortable in his position that he is forced to depart hence. Or they open upon him the thunders of the higher anathema. So, held in "durance vile," under the threats, very significantly suggested, of a withdrawal of support, or removal from office, or, it may be, expulsion from church communion, he stifles conscience, sells his manhood, and ceases from that hour to be God's FREE man. Is his conscience free? It may not be the sublime, ex-cathedra denunciations of the Vatican, but the equally arrogant and illiberal decisions of the session or the presbytery.

In many ways the conscience is held in chains. The spirit of bigotry and dogmatic intolerance still prevails. The cry, "He followeth not with us," still goes up to the Master's ears, and calls for vengeance on the dissenting object of theological odium. The confessional, or the spiritual court of death awaits non-conformity to the reigning order of faith and practice. The victims of this dry, blasting simoom of ecclesiastical despotism lie thick along the highway of modern church history. The victim of Romish intolerance, when she sought to make laws for the conscience, was impaled, eviscerated, tortured; now his brother in sufferings is scourged with the cords of sarcasm, has the key of fellowship turned against him, or, by secret management, is made odious to "the elect." O, when will the emancipation of conscience be complete? When will this benign power, the eye of Divinity within us, be disenthralled from every incumbrance, and be left where God left it, responsible only to him?

It was a noble utterance of the assembly of divines at Westminster, which they made: "God alone is Lord of the conscience." (See the Presbyterian Confession of Faith.) [511]

Our government is the only known government which, looking vigilantly after all the social interests of the people, has ventured on the responsible and untried experiment of letting the conscience alone. It has let us gloriously alone! God preserve it forever!

The importance of appealing to the Conscience in Conversion.

The Church should be laid in righteousness. A scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Messiah's kingdom. So every member of it should bow with an intelligent surrender to that scepter. It is not doubted nor denied that motives which appeal to the sense of fear, and which move the soul with a desire of safety and personal salvation, are legitimate. More, they are Scriptural. "Save yourselves from this untoward generation." "Flee from the wrath to come." "Beware, lest that come upon you which is written in the prophets. Behold, ye despisers, and wonder and perish." Many such are in the Word of God. So also the wide range of motives of benevolence. The goodness of God invites to repentance. Let the goodness of God, then, be pressed pointedly and eloquently. Yet the conscience should not be neglected. It should be thoroughly aroused and fully enlightened. Conversions would be more thorough, and apostasies fewer. The excited fears will subside. Impassioned appeals are highly important; but follow them up with the stronger reasons which lie at the foundation of permanent reformation.

Many appeals for conversion by partisan pleaders do but corrupt the heart. They encourage selfishness, rather than self-denial, in it. Men are persuaded to come in because they are of use to the Church. They have talents. Their influence is great, and many are looking to them. They are very good men now, and need nothing to [512] complete their character but the Christian profession. Thus they are flattered, coaxed, besought with protestations of friendship, and of the happiness to us if they will but take their place with us. Ah! the desecration of the Gospel! Impious flattery! Does Jesus Christ need sinners for his sake? Do they not, rather, need him for their own sake? It is shameful to set the Lord begging thus for followers. Thousands have been "beat up" into the ranks of the Church by spirited charges upon their honor, their manhood; their bravery has been challenged, and all the selfhood of the heart aroused, and plied dexterously to swell the host of nominal church-members. Then the numbers were carefully footed up and sent forth to the world by bulletin, herald, and proclamation. Alas! the Church militant! Wars come of passion. With passion and pride untamed and unhumbled, such converts quickly relapse, or remain to bear the bitter, crabbed fruits of such a planting.

Men should not be pressed into the Church faster, or beyond the desires of their own repentant hearts. If the preacher would not have his work prove "wood, hay, and stubble," let him see to it that he apply the motives which will lead the soul to conviction for sins; that he should make chief his aim to lead up the conscience to Christ, and lay the crucified Redeemer in the conscience of the sinner.

In respect of children, this is, probably, still more important. How admirable and worthy of all imitation the course of the holy apostle: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord; for this is right." (Eph. vi: 1.) Note well the motive. He descends not to the plane of selfishness. He lifts the heart of pliant childhood quite up to the highest of motives. It is right. He touches and teaches [513] the conscience. Here is a lesson deserving the careful study of teachers and preachers, and, above all, of parents, whose office in this behalf can not be alienated from them, nor delegated to any other person whatever.

Motives form character. Then lay the foundations aright. Many lives are false throughout, not because their course of action is evil or erroneous, but because the motives are all wrong from which flow the actions of such lives. Multitudes are never undeceived by others. They never detect the fundamental error themselves, and their whole life is a well-managed deception, with nothing in it of Christ, of sacrifice, of self-sacrifice, of self-abnegation, of self-devotion. "I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live: yet not I, but the grace of God liveth in me. And the life which I live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me, and gave himself for me." (Gal. ii: 20.) [514]

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