

Having a Good Conscience

by Charles Finney

A good conscience is essential for living a life that is pleasing to God and promoting the cause of God in the world.

Scripture: Proverbs 28:1, Acts 24:16, Romans 2:15, 2 Corinthians 1:12, 1 Timothy 1:5, 1 Timothy 3:9, 2 Timothy 1:3, Hebrews 13:18, 1 Peter 2:19, 1 Peter 3:16

Topics: "Moral Integrity", "Conscience"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the significance of maintaining a good conscience, explaining that it involves moral awareness, enlightenment, and obedience to its dictates. He outlines the conditions necessary for a good conscience, including the need for divine light and the importance of indulging and obeying one's conscience. Finney argues that a good conscience is essential for self-respect, peace of mind, and usefulness in society, while also being indispensable for salvation. He warns that those who neglect their conscience become a nuisance to society and are ultimately odious to God and others. The sermon concludes with a call to heed the conscience, as it is vital for spiritual well-being and moral integrity.

Transcript

"Having a good conscience; that whereas they speak evil of you, as of evil doers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ." -- 1 Pet: 3:16

The discussion of this text will lead me,

I. TO DEFINE CONSCIENCE.

II. TO SHOW WHAT IS IMPLIED IN HAVING A GOOD CONSCIENCE.

III. THE CONDITIONS UPON WHICH WE MAY HAVE A GOOD CONSCIENCE.

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A GOOD CONSCIENCE.

I. What is Conscience?

In answer, conscience is said by some writers to be moral consciousness; that is, consciousness as exercised on moral subjects. Consciousness in general is the mind's notice of its own existence and of its own states. In its particular reference to moral states of mind, it might be considered as moral

consciousness, and this is precisely the idea which some writers attach to the term, conscience.

In the popular sense, however, the term means more than this. It includes not only the mind's notice of its own moral states, but the accompanying state of feeling. Every body knows that when a mind whose moral sense is not utterly perverted, notices its own right moral states, there springs up a delightful feeling of approbation; and when such a mind notices its own wrong moral states, there arises a feeling of intense and agonizing disapprobation. Now, in the popular conception of conscience, these feelings of approval and disapproval are associated together with the mind's recognition of its own right and wrong states as all included under the term conscience.

II. What is implied in having a good Conscience.

1. That it be enlightened. Some persons hold such exalted or rather such perverse views of the sufficiency of human reason that they see no need of any divinely revealed light. Another class speak of conscience as being itself the light of God in the soul, and they deem this of itself amply sufficient for the perfect guidance of the human heart and life. Now, in opposition to both of these views, it is quite plain that we need the aid of a written revelation, and the yet additional aid of the Spirit of God to give its revealed truth efficiency upon the heart.

Especially is it essential to a good conscience, that there should be in the mind a well-developed idea of the S[s]pirit of the law of God. If the mind errs on this point, or has defective views, there must of course be what is called an evil conscience. For example, suppose a man has no idea of the rule of duty, except as it respects outward conduct; he does not regard it as reaching the heart at all; then his conscience is not enlightened, and cannot be a good conscience. Its decisions must fail in a most fundamental point. It is only when the true idea of the law as a rule of duty is well developed, that a man can have a good conscience.

2.* It is implied in a good conscience that it be quick and tender. There may be a well developed idea of law, and this one important condition of a good conscience may be present, and yet the mind may be so sluggish and apathetic in respect to its moral relations that the conscience becomes almost perfectly inefficient. There may be various moral states which the mind does not notice at all. For example, it may not notice indulgence of appetite; feelings of envy; violations of the law of love in business transactions. Now it is essential to a good conscience that it be quick to notice any and every departure from the law of love; in fact, it should notice instantaneously all our moral acts and states of mind. It should be in an active state of attention, incessantly comparing the mind's states and acts with the rule of duty--always on the alert to know whether every thing we say, do, or even think is pleasing to God.

A child may understand its parent's requirements well, and yet may be so negligent as not only to fail to do the things required, but he may fail even to notice his own negligence, and may not be really conscious that he is neglecting a most important filial duty. Now this, as every one must see, is a deplorably defective state of the moral faculties. The conscience of such a child is utterly wrong.

The same defects of conscience are often exceedingly apparent in our relations to God. The mind may understand the law of God, and yet may be so little disposed to attend to its own moral states and compare them with that law, that the man might as well have no conscience at all. In such a state the reason performs none of the functions that belong properly to the conscience.

3. It is essential to a good conscience that it be persevering. I may perhaps illustrate what I mean under this head by alluding to the will. Some individuals have a great will; a will so resolute and persevering that they never give up any thing they undertake. If their will is set upon any object, they never relinquish it till it is gained.

There is something extremely analogous to this in the conscience of some men. Their conscience will never rest till its demands are yielded. It persists in its work until it gains the ascendancy, and the desired change is effected.

Now it is vastly desirable that the conscience should have this quality of unyielding perseverance. When the mind becomes conscious of any particular form of sin, the conscience ought to persist in rebuking it until it be thoroughly and forever abandoned. Our conscience will do us no good if it stops short of this.

4. It is essential to a good conscience, that we obey its dictates. It will ultimately be weary of testifying for God if we refuse to hear and obey its voice. When its demands are long resisted and its voice unheeded, it seems to retire as it were into its inner sanctuary--cease to reiterate its unheeded remonstrances, and employ itself only in putting on record for future use all the contempt and abuse it is receiving. Its accounts will one day show that it was not dead nor sleeping. It was silently preparing for the judgment scene, and the eternal state beyond, where its claims shall be reasserted and its grievances be heard.

III. The conditions upon which we may have a good conscience.

1. There must be light;--a correct and thoroughly developed idea of duty.

But 2. There must be something more than the unaided light of the human understanding. The mind must have divine light, that light which God, and God alone can give. This light is promised to those who seek it, and all observation and experience show that without it, we seek in vain to find in any of our depraved race the true and well developed idea of moral obligation.

3. A third condition is indulgence. If I may use this term in this relation, I would say, you must indulge your conscience if you would give it efficiency.

It seems to be a law of all our mental and moral powers, that they must be indulged in order to be fully developed. For example, let the will be indulged, and its demands will become more and more imperative; its energy accumulates; its power is developed. On the other hand, let the will be suitably resisted, and in a proper way put down, and it yields--a great change takes place. Some children seem to have no will. They are perfectly submissive to the will of their parents. Their own will seems to be lost in their parent's will, so that the only will they have left is to do the will of their parents.

A similar change takes place where the soul really submits to God. It ceases to have any will of its own. Its only will now is to do God's will most perfectly. Nothing else can please such a soul.

Now, God must always bring the soul into this state before he can bless. Hence we see explained the thousand measures of his providence;--they have for their end the discipline of the will. They are divinely planned to subdue the will and bring it to bow in perfect submission to the will of God.

While submission and discipline have this result, indulgence has the opposite. Indulgence strengthens the will against God, and against submission to any known authority but itself.

So of the sensibility. Indulgence greatly augments its power. Sometimes the emotions, by indulgence become overpowering, and the man loses all self-control. Discipline and restraint have the opposite effect.

The same law prevails respecting the conscience. Give it the moral supremacy which it ought to have--let it have its own way, and its efficiency and energy are greatly augmented. It speaks then with solemn authority as if it were indeed a voice of God in the soul. Its rebukes inflict keener pain; its smiles shed over the soul a sweeter joy.

Hence it appears that the conscience is under the same law as all our other mental faculties. Trample it down and it seems to yield; it rebukes you with less decision and authority. Continue to resist it, and it seems almost to die; its voice is hushed; it ceases to remonstrate.

We may hence appreciate the importance of this condition of a good conscience. We must indulge it, and give it its appropriate place among the powers of the soul. That place is the throne of dominion. Conscience ought to bear rule over all our powers and their entire action. Hence it should be obeyed, and its demands always treated with profound regard.

IV. We next consider the importance of having a good conscience.

1. It is intimated with great justice in our text that a good conscience is indispensable that we may commend ourselves to the consciences of other men. Nothing can be more true than this. To good men, especially, we never can commend ourselves, unless we have an enlightened and good conscience.

2. A good conscience is indispensable to self-respect. No man can really respect himself who does not keep a good conscience. It is impossible that he should. He may flatter himself in his own eyes, but genuine self-respect he never can have unless the foundation for it be laid in the ennobling consciousness of aiming evermore to do right, according to the dictates of an enlightened conscience.

3. It is essential to peace of mind. That real equanimity--that well-founded peace of mind, which he may have, who always obeys a good conscience, can never be had on any other conditions. The man who violates his conscience cannot have it.

4. A good conscience is essential to usefulness. Without it, you can have but little influence over others. Those men whose moral sentiments are loose will practice loosely wherever their interest prompts them to do so, and will surely lose the respect of the community. This once lost, the less they say about religion the better. The less they do to urge other men to be just and holy, the better. If their life and spirit is such that whenever they say a word to recommend religion, the thought rushes into every body's mind, "Physician, heal thyself," that man may as well hold his peace. His first business should be to heal himself. Let him first set his own conscience right and live according to its dictates; then the time may come when people will hear and regard what he says.

When Paul and Silas were preaching the gospel at Phillippi, a sooth-saying woman was employed by the devil to frustrate their efforts. She had long been imposing upon the people until her character had become perfectly odious. Of course she was a good tool for the devil to use. He sends her after the Apostles, and just when they are getting the attention and the hearts of the people, he sets her a shouting--"These men are the servants of the Most High God, which show unto us the way of salvation." The people are at once repelled; they will not believe the best truth in the universe coming from such a quarter; they turn away, and the Apostles seem likely to be utterly nonplussed in respect to introducing the

gospel there. Paul is "grieved," and turning to the woman, commands the evil spirit in the name of Christ to come out of her. Then the word of the Lord had free course.

Now what this woman said was true enough--but, O, to have it said by such a woman! It was enough to undo and nullify all that the best preacher of the gospel on earth could accomplish.

So every where and in regard to all cases where men of a loose and evil conscience would fain try to do good. Let a drunkard blow his putrid breath into your face and exhort you to be a Christian. He could not do a worse thing for your salvation. Let a man of known dishonesty get up in your prayer and conference meetings to speak for God, and all that love the cause of God are agonized, and all that hate it are made full easy of their consciences. Let such a man go about in your families with ever so many good things on his tongue--yet if his dishonest life gainsay his fair words, it were infinitely better he should never say a word. Often has the cause of religion ample occasion to say, Deliver me from my professed friends.

If a man has loose notions of morality on any points of practice, he will be known, and his talk in favor of religion might as well be spared. It matters little whether he speaks for religion or against it,--his life is against it, and his own words in its favor can be nothing better than a scandal.

5. men who do not keep a good conscience must become odious to any good society. Such men could not be respected even in hell. Every body knows that in a community of thieves and robbers they would be despised. Every community is constrained by the demands of self-preservation to insist upon obedience to conscience in at least some points. Hence the worst communities known to us in the universe have their moral regulations which it is utterly disreputable and even scandalous to violate. Deeply as our moral nature has been corrupted by sin, it still retains some of the outlines of its original structure. Under some circumstances it will yet abhor and condemn wrong doing.

6. If we do not keep a good conscience we must be odious to God, to our neighbor, and to ourselves. Our state is odious in itself and it cannot appear otherwise than odious to any beings under whose observation it may come.

7. A man who does not keep a good conscience becomes a nuisance in society. You know there are such things as natural nuisances, as a pond or a marsh that breeds the ague, or a vessel that brings into port the yellow fever. So also there are such things as moral nuisances. The former acts injuriously upon the health--the latter upon the spirituality and piety of the people. A man of an evil conscience is a nuisance of the latter class. If our jurors could wisely take cognizance of such things they might complain of every such man as a moral nuisance to the community in which he lives.

8. Having a good conscience will secure the favor of God and peace of conscience. It secures these rich blessings by a law of necessity. God can never fail to bestow his smiles upon him who keeps an enlightened conscience void of offense, and surely he who maintains such a conscience will have the joy and peace of self-approbation.

9. Yet again he will have the respect of other men. The case may be such that he will have nothing else about him to command respect; yet even then he cannot fail to be really respected for maintaining a good conscience. You have all seen cases of this.

Such a man will of course be useful. His example is a blessing though he should never speak, or had not even the power of speech. The reputation of a good conscience will give any man such a character that

what he does say will have weight. Hence he is furnished with a most valuable power of influence for doing good.

10. One consideration more. Maintaining a good conscience is absolutely indispensable to salvation. No man can be saved who does not mean to do right, and who does not take pains to know what is right in his own case and in all its varied circumstances. What! a man be saved without a good conscience? Then it is a vain thing that God as said--"Without holiness no man shall see the Lord." What sort of a heaven is that man fitted to enter who does not keep a good conscience? How could he dwell in that city wherein shall "in no wise enter anything that worketh abomination or maketh a lie?" No; let that man lay it deeply to heart that if his conscience be not heeded--if its decisions are not obeyed, he has no possible ground for expecting to go to heaven.

REMARKS.

1. Those who have not a good conscience are not aware how they appear to others. I have not infrequently had occasion to expostulate with persons of loose conscience, and when I have told them how they were regarded in the community, they have been astounded. They had never so much as thought of this. It had never been told them, and they had not the discernment to see it themselves. Having managed to keep a pretty good opinion of themselves, they have been so blind to their own real character and have so misinterpreted its commonest developments that they have not been aware of the impressions which themselves are making upon the public mind.

Not long since I was in a community where a man lives whom I have known for many years. He is unlike any other man I ever saw. A neighbor said of him --"He seems to have no friends. Nobody loves--nobody respects him." Now this is precisely the result which ought to have been anticipated. Any body else but himself would anticipate it, but he did not. He seemed not aware of the state of feeling towards himself, although this feeling was so strong that people could hardly meet him in the streets without giving vent to their disesteem and even contempt. The trouble with him was, he had no conscience. He seemed incapable of appreciating the rights and interests of others if those rights or interests came at all into competition with his own.

So not infrequently some persons run so low in point of conscience that they are universally despised and yet sometimes are so stupid, or self-conceited, or blind as not to be aware of the fact. They should be pitied and often blamed too.

2. Such persons are often annoying and harassing their neighbors exceedingly. Their own selfishness seems to have blinded their own eyes so much that they can see no other selfishness but their neighbors, they never see their own, even though it may be so prominent, and so glaring as to amaze the whole neighborhood. It sometimes seems as if such persons would not scruple a moment to bring the small-pox into a neighborhood if it might in some perceptible degree subserve their own interests. The inquiry about the interests of others, either does not strike their mind at all, or if it does, it awakens not the least solicitude. What a conscience this!

Sometimes such persons will even go so far as to complain if they are not allowed to violate the most manifest principles of right and equity--as if they alone of all the world had a perfect right to trample on all other interests but their own!

It is indeed a great and sore trial to be so situated as to have much to do with men or women of this description. One needs in such a case to let patience have her perfect work. Surely there is any amount of occasion for its exercise.

There is one man who will keep unruly cattle, and let them run among his neighbors to destroy their crops. One such man is enough to chafe a whole community, and keep the body politic forever sore.

Others there are, and many others too will not pay their debts. Ministers and men not engaged in business are not apt fully to appreciate the evil of negligence in this thing. But business men feel the force of this. It is no wonder therefore that men who have much to do with commercial transactions should have the importance of perfect promptness and punctuality in this point thoroughly developed. But ministers and perhaps students too who are preparing for the ministry are notoriously delinquent, and very often greatly to their injury. Business men will not respect them, and are often so chafed by this negligence in ministers that they are thrown quite beyond the reach of any good influence from their preaching.

It is a great calamity for students preparing for the ministry to run into debt and keep in debt as some do throughout their course of study. There is the greatest danger lest they acquire a looseness of conscience in respect to paying debts, and learn to content themselves while they are wronging and perhaps distressing, or at least chafing and harassing those to whom they are indebted.

The evil in the case of students really becomes terrible when they get into such a state of mind that having means in their hands to pay their debts they can quietly go on, and spend their money in extravagant dress, riding for pleasure, or indulging their appetites. Such young men must have made utter shipwreck of a good conscience. If they go into the ministry with such a conscience and with such habits, they cannot fail to curse the church and scandalize the gospel.

This matter of recklessness in paying debts is a sore calamity among any people. Especially when it prevails among professors of religion, it brings a grievous scandal upon the cause of God, and breaks the right arm of Zion's strength. She cannot hold up the glorious law and gospel of God as a burning and shining light so long as there rests upon her own name, the stain of daily and manifest dishonesty in business transactions. How can Christians hope to reach the consciences of ungodly men, while standing in such ill odor for looseness and perhaps rank injustice in business transactions?

Again, I remark that a virtuous community will very soon by a natural process throw off such persons as the scum of society. It is a curious process in the social action of a community, yet you may often observe its operation. As the scum in a vessel under fermentation, or as the chaff under a strong wind, so men of loose consciences seem to get loosened up on a community; they rise to its surface and soon disappear. The fact is that they see they are not respected, nor wanted there. They get chafed, restive, uneasy, and are glad to make it convenient to be off. This is the natural process of things where there is virtue enough to create a strong public sentiment in favor of right. Then those who will not yield to this sentiment will find it very inconvenient to stay.

Where there is not health enough in the community to throw off its social scum, it must be in a very bad state. Just as in the physical system, if there is not enough of the vital energy to throw off disease or poison, the man must die; so in the social state, if there is not enough of the vigor of virtue to throw off moral nuisances and moral poisons, languishing and death must ensue. Often this process of moral corruption goes on until the pernicious results become so apparent and so glaring even, that a reaction follows, and people seem frightened by the horrid consequences of vice and learn in some measure to

appreciate virtue.

It is a rich luxury to have a good conscience. How mellow and glorious is the sun-light which it pours into the soul! Few only seem to know its blessedness--yet there are some who know it well. It is as you have sometimes seen the sun break forth from a cloud and all is glory before him. The universe seems to be lighted up into smiles of joy to greet his coming. Such is the atmosphere of peace and glory in which the soul seems to bathe itself when it enjoys the luxury of a good conscience. There is in fact no apparent distinction between this and the broad sun-light of God's own presence upon the soul.

Scarcely any thing will produce tears of joy more suddenly than for conscience to pour its sun-light approvingly upon the mind. When you have passed through a scene of great trial, through grace victorious, have you not found a delightful mingling of deep humiliation, and of overflowing gratitude to God that seems almost too rich a luxury of bliss for your heart to endure? You felt infinitely unworthy of such sustaining grace--you wondered how God could bestow it on such a one as you--yet was your inmost being stirred up to praise God for this grace, and you deemed it the richest joy of all, that God both deserved and would receive all, all the glory and the praise for all the good wrought in you by his Spirit and done through your being upheld by his power.

Your conscience approved of what through grace you had done, yet was there no pride--no self-gratulation; you cast yourself lower perhaps than ever at Jesus' feet to praise that grace which gave the victory.

The man who has a good conscience can be comfortable under any degree of outward reproach. Let all the world reproach him and cast out his name as vile, yet if conscience within is peaceful, all will be well. Let the men of his generation disown him--yea, let them wax hot in their rage against him and hustle him out of the world, yet may he be calm as a summer evening. What has he to fear? The deep foundations of his bliss are within--where no wrath or scorn of man can ever reach them. It is enough for him that conscience approves, and that his own infinite Father smiles upon his soul.

But right over against this, let that man have a vile conscience and he cannot have peace. Let all who know him conspire to approve and applaud him it is of no avail. Should angels from heaven mistake his character and give him honor, and devils from hell hide their faces before him in awe of his supposed virtue as if he were a bright angel, yet would his inmost being cry out and proclaim its earnest dissent against all such praise.--Yet would his conscience upbraid him, and the lack of its approval, like the lack of Mordecai's homage to Haman, would be enough to poison all the joy derivable from all other honor and approbation. So vain a thing it is for any man to hope to be happy without a good conscience.

The most damning guilt of all belongs to those whose consciences are enlightened but are not quick and tender, and who do not obey its dictates. They know their duty but they do it not. With light enough to be angels in virtue they have stupidity and moral hardness enough to sink them to the rank of devils. No guilt can be so black as that of knowing the claims of God, and yet deliberately setting the mind, despite of conscience, to trample those claims under one's feet. No moral state can be worse than that of having a conscience thus abused, thus violated of its virtue so to speak, and rifled of its purity, till it ceases to persuade towards the path of life.

Are any of those impenitent sinners who hear me, going on this moment in that career of death? Sinners, beware!!

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