

# If It Feels Good, Do It – 1 Corinthians 4:3-5; Jeremiah 17:9

## Introduction

[What is conscience.mp4] – show movie clip

### What is conscience?

Well, Jiminy Cricket began by saying conscience “is that still, small voice that people won’t listen to.”

But still, in spite of his somewhat cynical definition, Jiminy decides to become Pinocchio’s conscience when asked to do so by the Blue Fairy and in his coronation she said, “I dub you Pinocchio’s conscience, lord high keeper of the knowledge of right and wrong, counselor in moments of high temptation, and guide along the straight and narrow path.”

It’s universally accepted that people need some kind of standard, some set of basic values that can help us keep our lives on track, to guide us into what is right, and to keep us out of trouble

However, what exactly should be the source of that standard is up for debate

For many people today, conscience is the answer and many are prone to live their lives solely on the basis of whether they feel good or bad about the things they do

And many people decide the appropriateness or the permissibility of the things they do by whether they can sleep at night after having done those things

“Let your conscience be your guide” seems to be the dominant director of behavior which leads to the mantra, “If it feels good, do it” and I suppose we should state the obvious reverse of that guidance, “If it feels bad, don’t do it”

Everyone has a conscience; it’s a God-given inner voice by which God reveals his law in the mind of every person

**Romans 2:14-16** reveals this to be true –

*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.*

### But the conscience is far from infallible

We all have heard of, or perhaps even know personally, people who could do terrible things and still sleep like a baby at night because their consciences were clear – or at least they weren’t bothered by their conscience

Still, we want to trust our own conscience and we use the language of conscience all the time when discussing decisions we have made or actions we have taken

We speak about having “inner peace” with what we have done or with the decision we have made and we take the lack of guilt as proof that all must be okay

Otherwise, we reason, our conscience would have perked up and warned us that something was wrong

But can we fully trust our conscience to correctly steer us through life?

Especially when we see the consciences of others leading them astray and allowing them to do what is obviously wrong

“Lord high keeper of the knowledge of right and wrong”

“Counselor in moments of high temptation”

“Guide along the straight and narrow path”

Those are pretty lofty expectations aren’t they?

Perhaps too lofty to entrust to something as fallible as our conscience

But still we tend to rely on our conscience as the gold standard for controlling our behavior because we have a flawed understanding of the true nature of our conscience and the factors that influence it

And when we believe that God gave us a conscience so that we could live according to the standard “If it feels good, do it” we once again find that something we know just ain’t so

This morning, we are going to begin by looking at **the true nature of conscience**

Then we will consider some of the **fundamental problems with conscience**

And, lastly, we will see that there is some truly **good news regarding conscience** that gives us hope that it could still function as God designed it and as we would like it to do

So let’s begin by looking at **the true nature of conscience**

## **I. The true nature of conscience**

The fundamental problem most of us have is that we think our conscience is something that it’s not and, therefore, we expect it to do something that it was never designed to do

Most of us treat our conscience as if it were a thermometer – a kind of spiritual thermometer that will instantly tell us the moral “temperature” of any situation

And we believe we can instantly know if a situation is too hot, too cold, or just right simply by checking it out with our conscience – we might call that the Goldilocks approach to conscience – again, if it feels okay it must be okay

But in reality, our conscience is more like a thermostat than a thermometer and the distinction is vital to our understanding of the function of our conscience

Kathy and I are very different when it comes to how to define a comfortable temperature

I am often complaining of it being overly warm while she’s hunting for a jacket

I open a window at night to enjoy the cool night air while I sleep only to hear her complain that she’s freezing while curled into a tight ball under a bunch of extra blankets piled on her side of the bed

What I feel as a refreshing breeze she feels as an arctic blast – you get the picture

Simply put, we have different internal thermostats

The thermometer reads the same for both of us but our reaction to the temperature is quite different because we have different internal thermostats that cause us react to a common temperature very differently

Thermometers objectively measure hot and cold but thermostats aren’t designed that way

They don’t define a comfortable temperature; we define what is comfortable and they simply react to our definitions

And that’s the way our consciences work

Rather than objectively measuring an action or a thought or a word or a motive according to God’s standard of right and wrong, our conscience actually only tells us how we feel about the action or thought or word

In other words, they tell us when we are violating *our* standard but not necessarily when we are violating God’s standard

And Paul alludes to this reality in **1Corinthians 4:3-5** where he writes:

*But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.*

The key in that passage is verse 4 where Paul basically says his conscience is clear – he isn't aware of anything against himself and he believes he is in the clear

But he says that doesn't matter because his conscience isn't the final arbiter of whether or not he has offended God and he knows the day is coming when his actions will be judged by the only standard that matters – God's standard

Conscience is a valuable, God-given tool that helps us to know when we have gone or are about to go astray but they aren't the final standard because they aren't infallible

And that's because they come with some **fundamental problems** which we will look at next

## **II. Fundamental problems with conscience**

As we have just seen, our conscience will allow us to do what we are comfortable doing without raising any alarm or pang of guilt even if it is directly opposed to what God would have us do – But why is that? How can it go so far amiss?

### **How they are programmed**

Well, the first problem has to do with **how our conscience is programmed** and since our conscience only responds to its programming it can lead us astray

Let me quickly point out that our conscience measures our thoughts, words, deeds, and motives against a standard that it believes to be true and authoritative over us and if the standard it's using is good its guidance will be good

The problem comes in when the "programming" is bad because the guidance based on bad programming will likely be bad also

### **GPS**

Back in January of 2016, there was a problem with the GPS satellite network

When one of the global positioning satellites was decommissioned, a software glitch sent bad timing data to some of the remaining satellites due to a programming error

The discrepancy was only 13 microseconds – that's 13 millionths of a second by the way – and that is such a small amount of time we might think it wouldn't matter

But the glitch caused chaos all over the earth that lasted for 12 hours before it was sorted out

Power grids were adversely affected as were communications and banking and radio equipment stopped working and a whole host of other problems were caused by a bad bit of programming

And of course it affected the most widely known use of those satellites, the GPS units we all rely on to get us places

So that some folks reported GPS units that showed them to be 40-50 miles off course from where they actually were

Likewise, our consciences need to be programmed correctly if they are to respond correctly

But what happens when your conscience is set to a standard that is **overly legalistic** to the point that it says a thing that is biblically acceptable or sensible is bad?

Well, in that case your conscience will prevent you from enjoying a God-given pleasure or make you feel unnecessary guilt for having engaged in something that God allows and perhaps even advises

Examples of beliefs that result in consciences that are over-sensitive are myriad and I don't want to wander off into examples that would get us off track

I simply want to say that there are still plenty of Pharisees around who are adding to God's rules for living and causing unwarranted wounding of consciences

But just as a conscience can be programmed to be over-sensitive it can also be programmed to be **unresponsive**

That often happens when someone first accepts Christ and it can take a bit of time for them to become aware of God's will and to subsequently adjust their consciences

I'm really glad that the Holy Spirit doesn't hit us with all of our deficiencies all at once – that would be overwhelming  
But out of nothing but ignorance we can have a quiet conscience that is unwarranted

The apostle Paul spends a good bit of time speaking to consciences that might well be out of whack in 1Corinthians 8 and Romans 14

And we need to recognize that a lack of feelings of guilt doesn't indicate a lack of guilt – it could well be that we just haven't been made aware of our wrongdoing yet

Our consciences are also programmed by **our culture and those whom we hang around with**

We tend to take our moral cues from the people around us and figure the majority can't be wrong so we go along  
But majority doesn't equal morality and what is right and wrong isn't determined by a democratic vote

We don't find anywhere in the Bible where God promises to turn his people back to the right path if they head the wrong way *en masse* – actually, quite often, history seems to show that the best way to determine God's will for the correct course of action is to look at what the crowd is doing and then do the opposite

But it can be tough to fly solo or to go against the flow so we allow our conscience to be improperly influenced

We can also look to the **wrong sources** for advice

There are a great many false teachers who are also best-selling authors who have set themselves up as mentors providing further programming

And when you add in those who are themselves merely misled but instructing others, it's a wonder we can trust our consciences at all

But poor programming isn't the only problem we have with conscience – we can also **sear or desensitize our conscience**

### **Can be seared or desensitized**

Anyone who plays a stringed instrument can tell you the value of calluses

When you first start to play a stringed instrument it hurts as you press your fingers against the strings

But, over time, with repeated exposure to those biting strings, your fingers start to develop calluses and become desensitized to what formerly caused pain

The same desensitization happens to bakers and chefs who repeatedly burn their fingers

In time they no longer feel the sensation of heat the same way the way most people do and they can handle hot pans and dishes that would cause most of us to jerk our hands away

Our consciences can likewise become callused and desensitized when we repeatedly expose them to sin

As we have seen, everyone has an innate sense of what is right and what is wrong – it may not be a perfect sense but we just instinctively feel some measure of guilt when we first violate our conscience

And most people feel at least a pang of guilt the first time they do something that violates their conscience

But our consciences are very fluid and we make adjustments to them regularly – and that adjustment is rarely for the better

And the more we engage in an activity that awakens our conscience the less it does so until we can actually put our conscience to sleep permanently

The reality is that our tendency is to tune the sensitivity of our conscience to match our behavior rather than adjust our behavior to match our conscience

I often quote the late senator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan who coined the term, "defining deviancy down"

He postulated that we can only handle a certain level of deviancy so we have to continually decide that more and more things really aren't deviant after all or else we will become overwhelmed – and that's true of both individuals and societies

And that's a dangerous practice as Paul says our sin-hardened consciences cause us to "store up wrath" against ourselves on the day of God's judgment (**Romans 2:5**) without our even recognizing we are doing it

Not only that but we will also find that we can actually begin to approve of those who do wrong (**Romans 1:32**)

Eventually, we can find ourselves looking to those same people to be our standard as we see revealed in **1Timothy 4:1-2**

*Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared...*

Then we have to recognize that our conscience is suspect from the start because of **our sin nature and blind spots**

### **We have a sin nature and blind spots**

We can also have difficulty with understanding what our conscience is telling us even under the best of circumstances because, as a result of Adam's sin we are all born with a sin nature that interferes with our understanding

So, even though we may have the best of desires, motives, and intentions we can go astray because of inborn static that causes the message our conscience is sending to be garbled and misunderstood

And we all have blind spots that cause us to miss things and to overlook things so that our conscience doesn't even have an opportunity to register them

That can happen to any of us as we misinterpret God's Word or God's leading simply out of our own sincere yet flawed understanding that feeds us wrong information

For all of those reasons our consciences should be viewed with suspicion – but there is **good news regarding conscience** that should give us hope

### **III. Good news regarding conscience**

The really good news about our conscience is also one of the things we just talked about being a detriment to it

It's easily adjustable

That means that we can choose to align it with the proper standard should we choose to do so

We have the ability to realign our conscience to what the Bible teaches and live our lives accordingly

While we may never be able to eliminate all of the outside influences that try to adjust our consciences to a faulty standard and while we can never fully get rid of our sin nature – we can so immerse ourselves in Scripture that we leave little room for outside influences to take root

And by doing that we give the Holy Spirit ammunition to help us overcome and overrule our sin nature

I remember some of my friends who were renting an apartment where the landlord had locked the thermostat so that they had no control over how hot or cool it was

At least they had no legitimate control over it

But what they found was in the summer they could put a lamp under the thermostat and fool it into thinking it was hotter than it really was so the air conditioner would continue to run

And in the winter they could put an icepack on the thermostat to fool it the other way

In a sense, they adjusted the calibration of the thermostat by altering its environment

And we can do likewise with the thermostat of our conscience by surrounding it and immersing it in God's Word and by asking the Holy Spirit to cut through the static and make the meaning and application of it plain to our hearts and minds

Then, when our conscience sends us a signal, we need to be sure to check the warning against what we find in God's Word to be sure that what our conscience is telling us is correct

Much like the Bereans did when verifying the validity of what Paul was teaching them (**Acts 17:10-11**)

## **Conclusion**

Most of us are familiar with Martin Luther and how he was called before the religious council known as the Diet of Worms and commanded to renounce his teaching

Martin Luther is quoted as saying to the council:

"Unless I am convicted by sacred Scripture, or by evident reason, I cannot recant, for my conscience is held captive by the Word of God, and to act against conscience is neither right nor safe."

Conscience is a valuable, God-given early warning system - but it serves us best only when it is rightly calibrated and understood

For that reason it's best to treat conscience as a yellow warning light or a red stop light that should cause us to slow down and be cautious or to slam on the brakes and then check what the Bible has to say before we proceed

Because, as valuable as it is as a warning, it makes a really bad green light that tells us to continue full speed ahead

**Jeremiah 17:9** tells us – *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*

So we need to recognize that we simply cannot rely on our conscience to be our "Lord high keeper of the knowledge of right and wrong" – that has never been the function God intended for it

At best, it might serve as our "Counselor in moments of high temptation" or our "Guide along the straight and narrow path" as long as we make sure to keep it calibrated to God's Word – because only then is it reliable even for that purpose

Let' pray