

# Welcome!

- Thank you for joining us! In the light of our present circumstances, we welcome you to this series entitled *An Introduction to Christian Ethics*. Today's topic is "The Nature and Function of Conscience."
- During this Zoom Video Webinar you will not be able to see other participants or interact with anyone. It is a view-only format. We hope this learning experience in the quiet and privacy of your own home will help you in your ethical decision-making.



A pair of ornate brass scales of justice, centered in the background. The scales are balanced, with both pans hanging at the same level. The central pillar is decorated with a series of stacked rings. The entire scale is set against a dark, gradient background.

# AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN ETHICS



# Introduction

Our focus today will be on the human conscience. It is likely that you have never heard a lecture or sermon on this subject. If you have, you are one of the few, for it is a subject that has been mostly neglected in contemporary society and in the Christian church. It should not be surprising, then, that when it is mentioned in conversation, neither party typically knows what the word means or what the role of conscience should be in their lives.

The reason it is important to understand the nature and function of the conscience is because it is a “priceless gift from God.” He created us in His image (*imago Dei*) and gave us a conscience in order that we might learn how to love Him and live under His lordship and authority.

# Introduction

As we begin our time together, consider the following questions:

- What is the conscience?
- How does it work?
- Does it always judge correctly?
- Can it change?
- How can I take care of my conscience?
- How can I keep from damaging it?







# Introduction

Just by asking these questions, we are admitting that there is something “real” about the conscience, even if it is difficult to define or describe. C.S. Lewis wrote about the difficulty of defining another word: *instinct*. “To say that migratory birds find their way by instinct is only to say that we do not know how migratory birds find their way.” However, the difficulty in defining “conscience” is removed when we make a careful search through the pages of God’s Word.

Because we experience both guilt and shame from some of our moral choices in the past and are able to carry secrets in our hearts, could it not also be true that “we 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 terrible tribunal?”

# OUTLINE FOR THIS WEBINAR

What Does the Word Conscience Mean?

O.T. Illustrations of Inner Discord

Xenophon's Account of Socrates' Trial

Paul and His Conscience

The Role of Conscience

Does Everyone Have a Conscience?

A Defiled and Seared Conscience

Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide?

How Your Conscience Can Be Cleansed



# What Does the Word *Conscience* Mean?

- The Greek word for conscience (*syneidesis*) is used 31 times in the New Testament.
- **Syneidesis**, a transliteration of the Greek into the English language, is constructed from two Greek words: **syn-** (with or together) + **eidesis** (to know) = “to know with, or together with” (OED). In other words, it means that a person has “knowledge of something with another person on the basis of eye-witness” (Kittel).
- Later, from the first century B.C., the noun began to be used for **conscience**. It means a “percipient and active self-awareness” (Kittel); “moral consciousness” (Arndt and Gingrich).



# What Does the Word *Conscience* Mean?

- The Latin is **conscius**, *adj.*, conscious; knowing; guilty; and **conscientia**, *n.*, conscience, consciousness; knowledge; remorse.
- The conscience “is **man himself aware of himself** in perception and acknowledgment, in willing and acting.” It is *your* conscience.
- The conscience is always concerned with **evaluating past actions**. Therefore, self-consciousness is either a *friendly* or *troublesome* witness, depending on our behavior. It is “a knowledge within the self of past action....a conviction of past misdeeds” (OED).
- “Moral conscience is not primarily concerned with preparation for approaching decisions, but with **assessing and condemning acts already committed**. Hence the normal case is the bad conscience; the good conscience is an exception.”





# How Kittel Describes the Conscience

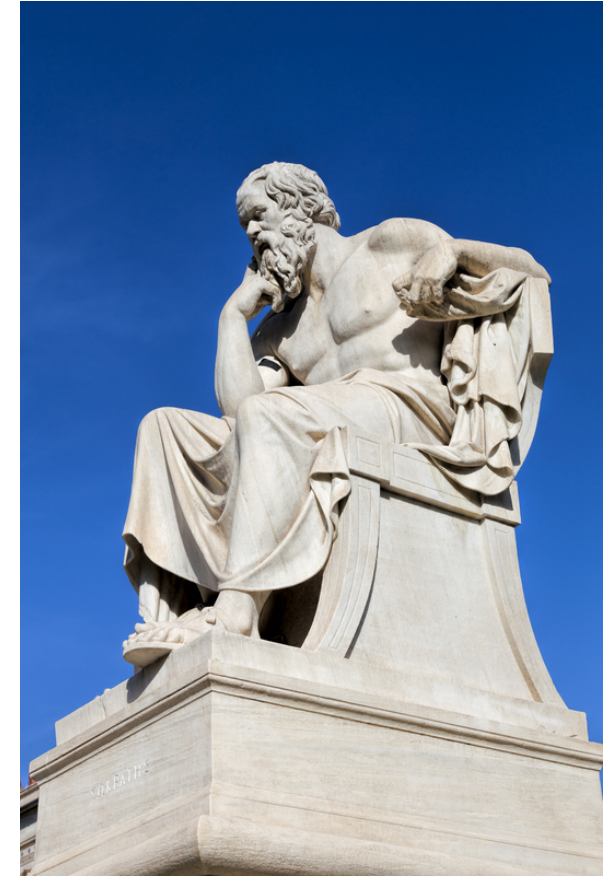
- “Conscience is the **observer** even when the public is excluded.”
- “The moral conscience is garbed in concepts from the legal sphere and takes on the function of the **prosecutor and judge** in one person.”
- “Conscience is like a **wound in the flesh**. It makes reproaches which burn more than any external fire, for it is the rational man who **finds fault with himself**.”
- We can be “**gnawed by conscience**.”
- “The **torments of conscience** into which man plunges himself by his own deeds.”

# Illustrations of Inner Discord in Man

- **Adam and Eve:** “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths” (Gen. 3:7).
- **Joseph’s brothers, ashamed of what they did to Joseph:** “Then they said to one another, ‘In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us’” (Gen. 42:21).
- **David and Saul:** “Then David arose and stealthily cut off a corner of Saul’s robe. And afterward David’s heart struck him, because he had cut off a corner of Saul’s robe” (I Sam. 24:4-5).

# Xenophon's Account of Socrates' Trial

“When the trial was over, Socrates remarked: ‘Well, gentlemen, those who instructed the witnesses that they must bear false witness against me, perjuring themselves to do so, and those who were won over to do this must feel in their hearts **a guilty consciousness of great impiety and iniquity**; but as for me, why should my spirit be any less exalted now than before my condemnation, since I have not been proved guilty of having done any of the acts mentioned in the indictment?’”



**Socrates**  
470 – 399 B.C.

# Paul and His Conscience

- “In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God, and before men” (Acts 24:16, NASV).  
“So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man” (Acts 24:16, ESV).
- Paul: “I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day” (Acts 23:1).
- “I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 9:1).
- “For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience that in holiness and godly sincerity...we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you” (II Cor. 1:12).

# Paul and His Conscience

- “But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (I Tim. 1:5).
- “This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith” (I Tim. 1:18-19).
- “Holding to the mystery of faith with a clear conscience” (I Tim. 3:9).
- “I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did, as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day” (II Tim. 1:3).



# Truths from These Texts

- A conscience may be blameless, good, clean, and clear.
- The conscience operates in relation to both God and man.
- The conscience always bears witness to the truth. We know in our inner man what the truth is about what we have done or not done. In that sense, our consciences bear testimony to the “really real.” Others may not know, but we do.
- A person may choose to abandon a good conscience, live for themselves, and “suffer shipwreck in regard to their faith.”
- A good conscience leads to honorable living. “Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things” (Heb. 13:18).



# The Role of Conscience

- The task of conscience is *elencho*, which means “to bring to light, expose, set forth, to point something out to someone, to reprove, correct. This comprises the whole process from accusation by the advocate to admonition, threat of punishment and condemnation by the judge.” “All things become visible when they are exposed by the light” (Eph. 5:13).
- *Elencho* is usually used “with the suggestion of putting the convicted person to shame.” “Which one of you **convicts** Me of sin?” (Jn. 8:46).
- “*Elencho* takes place before the inner forum of man.”
- “Conscience is the only impartial accuser and infallible judge.”

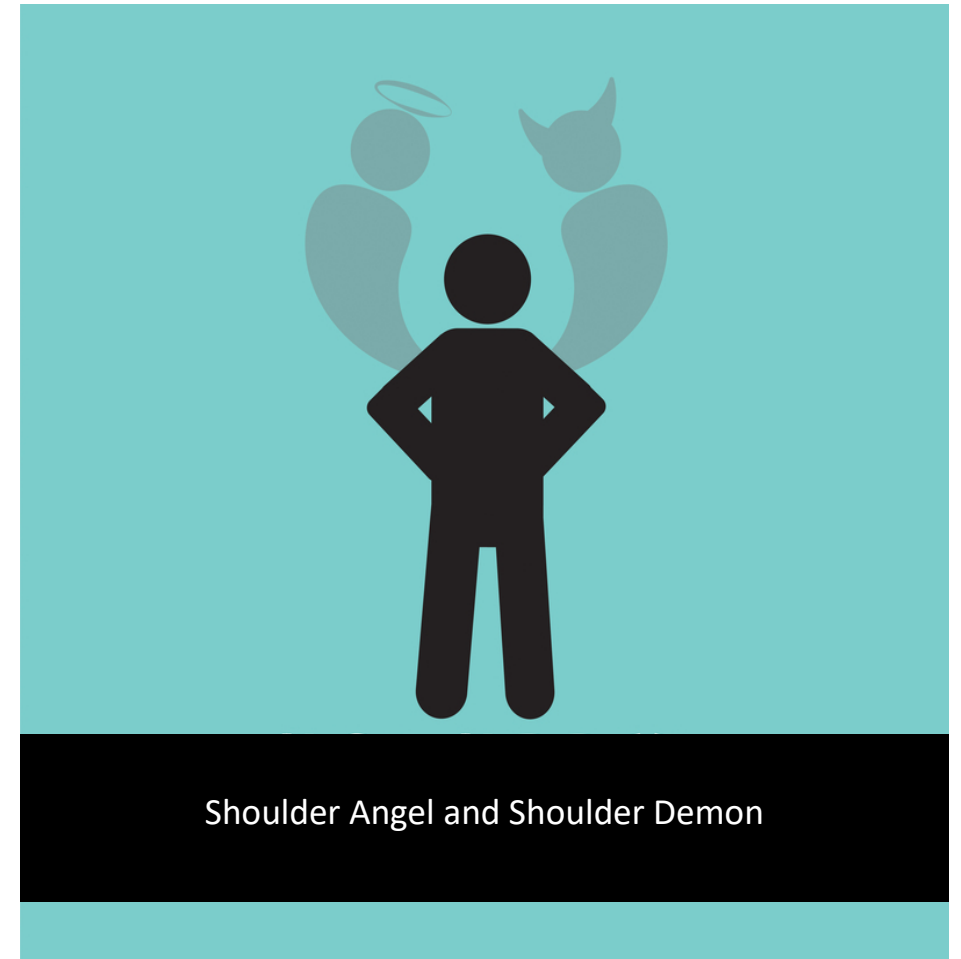


# The Role of Conscience

- “The voice of conscience seems so much like an independent judge rather than a kangaroo court.”
- “In that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternatively accusing or else defending themselves” (Rom. 2:15).
- “For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly” (I Pt. 2:19).
- “And keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame” (I Pt. 3:16).

# Does Everyone Have a Conscience?

- “Everyone has a conscience, and imperfect-but-accurate-enough version of God’s will, as standard equipment in their hearts.”
- We all know the difference between the transcendental virtues of beauty, goodness, and truth and those which destroy God’s good order by falsehood, evil, and disorder.





# A Defiled and Seared Conscience

- “To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both **their mind and their conscience are defiled**” (Titus 1:15).
- “But the Spirit explicitly says that in the later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars **seared in their own conscience** as with a branding iron” (I Tim. 4:1-2). The word means “cauterized as to their own conscience.”
- “By constantly arguing with conscience, stifling its warnings, and muffling its bell, they at last have reached the point where conscience no longer bothers them.”





# “Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide”

- Some say, “I need to listen to my heart;” “I need to follow my heart;” “This is what I should do;” “This is the right thing for me.”
- The underlying action is not necessarily guided by God’s law and values. The problem is one of formation, which results in orientation. If one’s conscience is not properly formed by His Word, then it will not point (or orient) you in the correct direction.
- Hence, “the analogy of conscience to a compass – it must be properly oriented. If a compass is not pointing to true North, it doesn’t matter how closely it is being followed – you are still going to go the wrong way, and the longer you continue in that wrong path, the more wrong you will be.”

# God's Moral Compass: The Bible

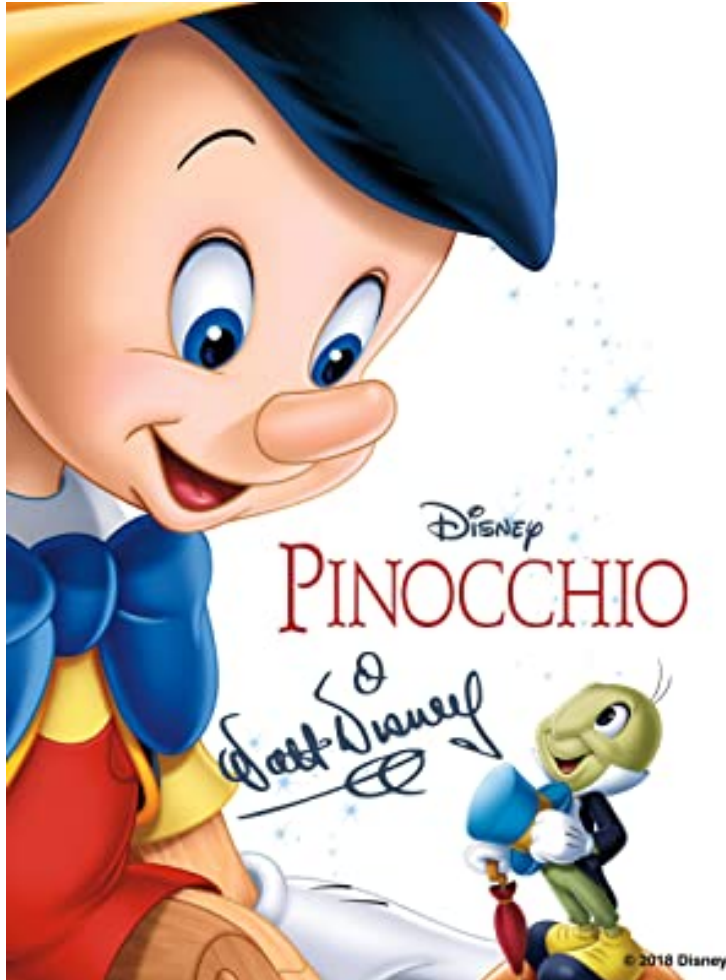


**C.S. Lewis**

1898-1963

“The human mind has no more power of inventing a new value than of imagining a new primary color, or, indeed, of creating a new sun and a new sky for it to move in.”

# Pinocchio



Fairy: “You must learn to choose between right and wrong.”

Pinocchio: “Right and wrong? But how will I know?”

Fairy: “Your conscience will tell you.”

Pinocchio: “What are conscience?”

Jiminy Cricket: “Well, I’ll tell ya! Conscience is that still, small voice that people won’t listen to. That’s just the trouble with the world today.”

Pinocchio: “Are you my conscience?”

Jiminy Cricket: “Who me?”



# Pinocchio

- Fairy: “Would you like to be Pinocchio’s conscience?”
- Jiminy Cricket: “Well, uh-huh.”
- Fairy: “Very well. What is your name?”
- Jiminy Cricket: “Cricket’s the name. Jiminy Cricket.”
- Fairy: “Kneel, Mr. Cricket.”
- Jiminy Cricket: “Huh? No tricks now.”
- Fairy: “I dub you Pinocchio’s conscience, lord high keeper of the knowledge of right and wrong, counselor in moments of temptation, and guide along the straight and narrow path. Arise, Sir Jiminy Cricket.”



# Pinocchio

- Jiminy Cricket: “Well! My, my! Say, that’s pretty swell! Gee thanks. But don’t I get a badge or something?”
- Fairy: “Well, we’ll see.”
- Jiminy Cricket: “You mean maybe I will?”
- Fairy: “I shouldn’t wonder.”
- Jiminy Cricket: “Make it a gold one?”
- Fairy: “Maybe. Now, remember, Pinocchio, be a good boy. **And always let your conscience be your guide.**”
- A supporting cultural affirmation about the role of conscience occurred in May, 1961, when Marvin Gaye released the hit single, ***Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide***.



# Renewal of the Heart

- “I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jer. 31:34).
- “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me....Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow....Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Ps. 51:1-3,7,10).
- “Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart” (Ps. 73:1).

# Cleansing the Conscience

- “How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (Heb. 9:14).
- “Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our body washed with pure water” (Heb. 10:22).
- Conscience is all about fighting sin in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Conviction leads to self-knowledge and the confession of sin.
- Our conscience warns us against further transgression.

# Look to Christ Alone



“Only the cross can fill that ever-widening gap between your consciousness of what you ought to be and your actual obedience. You place your trust more and more in Christ to make you acceptable to God.”