

Don't Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide Romans 2:11-16, Psalm 19

Portions adapted from "Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide" by David Dykes & Principles of Judgment by Freddy Fritz @ SermonCentral.com

A helicopter pilot flying over Seattle got lost in the dense fog. Emerging from the fog and having no idea where he was, He saw a tall office building nearby with people working inside, so he hovered near one of the windows and held up a sign asking "**Where am I?**" One of the workers wrote a response and held up a sign that said, "**You are in a helicopter.**" The pilot nodded his thanks and flew straight to the airport. When the passengers were curious and asked, "How could that sign 'you are in a helicopter' help you know where you were?" The pilot said, "Simple. The answer that guy gave me was technically correct, but completely useless, so I figured that must be the Microsoft Customer Relations Building and I knew where I was!"

Many Americans are circling around in a moral fog, with no idea which direction to go. Most of the moral advice you find in magazines or hear on talk-shows only creates more confusion. How can you know right from wrong? Well, how about this advice:

"Let your conscience be your guide."

No, that's NOT in the Bible. Do you know the source of that saying? It was included in a song from the 1940 Disney movie "Pinocchio," as Jiminy Cricket sings to the puppet boy, "*Take the straight and narrow path; and if you start to slide—give a little whistle, and always let your conscience be your guide.*" That's where many of us first heard it, but the saying has been around for a lot longer and is an old and proud member of a large collection of seemingly wise sayings...that really aren't.

Why is "*let your conscience be your guide*" unwise? The reason is because it's only half true. Your conscience can be your guide only if it is guided by God's law which has been implanted within your mind. But if you have actively ignored this internal law for some time, then like a compass with no reference points, your unguided conscience can quickly lead you astray.

That is part of what Paul is writing about here in Romans, chapter 2, while answering a much larger challenge against God's impartiality in judgment. Remember that in Chapter one, Paul has declared that when we ignore our internal knowledge of the true God—it is internal because God planted it in each one of us—we also lose our moral bearings and descend to a level that can only be described as a "*debased mind,*" *knowing but still doing wrong while encouraging others to do the same* (1:32).

Then in chapter two, Paul turns his attention to us "good people" as we nod approvingly upon hearing of those "bad people's" just condemnation. Paul says that we who claim to know and honor the law, are equally guilty before God, equally debased in

our thinking, because we condemn in others the same sins that we have excused in ourselves.

But then you can almost imagine some sly Pharisee trying to trip up Paul's argument by bringing up another old and proud untruth which we know as the "**what about the heathen**" question. In this instance it would be phrased: *If those of us who have ignored God's law, or excused ourselves from law are equally guilty before THE JUDGE, then what about those who never received God's law?* How can God impartially judge those who have never learned the Ten Commandments (what Paul means by "the law")?

What about that illiterate native on the Island of Pango Pango—who really liked the only missionary he ever met...*thought he tasted like chicken*. Having never had the chance to learn God's law, how could he ever be impartially judged by it?

Paul's answer, found here in verses 12-16, is that even this Pango Pango native stands guilty before God because, along with his internal knowledge of God, he also has God's law--a basic moral code--built into his heart and a conscience that accuses him when he breaks this law. Thus, both our internal knowledge of God and God's law serve as our moral map while our conscience works like a compass to guide us in the right direction and accuse when we go wrong. So let's deal with just these two questions today.

1. What law has God built into our hearts?
(Natural Law)
2. And why does our conscience sometimes accuse or excuse us according to this?

First let's consider the idea that humans have a "built in" basic version of the 10 Commandments. In verse 14, Paul makes a rather astounding statement.

When [**other nations**], who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. Romans 2:14

What Paul just said was that: even pagans, those who do not worship the true God, nevertheless carry within themselves a basic version of God's law, by which they can determine right from wrong and which they either obey or must reconcile with their disobedience. This is a rather dramatic claim coming from our Bible, but it is not

unique. Greek philosophers referred to this internal moral code as “natural law” something that in our day of secular multi-religious nations has once again become a hot topic in legal theory. The question now being asked is this: **Can we find one universally acknowledged set of laws (moral codes) under which multi-cultural, multi-religious groups can live peacefully together?**

The Judeo/Christian culture has long maintained that the 10 Commandments were just such a codified expression of natural law—applicable to all people regardless of their religion or lack thereof—which is why copies of these commandments have long graced our courthouse walls and public squares. But now, with the western world in open rebellion against Christian culture, it also feels compelled to reject the universal standard of the 10 Commandments because they are so closely identified with the Christian faith. This will probably make it very difficult to ever again agree upon any other version of Natural Law by which all people might be governed.

Before we test the reality of this Natural Law within us, where else might our Bible lend support for Paul’s claim of an in-built moral code?

I think that Jesus was referring to our internal moral code when he taught his disciples that there is nothing that goes in but only that which comes out of a person—from their heart—that can defile them. Jesus said:

Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach ... It is what comes out of a person that defiles.

For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.’ (Mark 7:18-20)

But in order for us to identify such attitudes coming out “from within” us as defiling, then we have to have an internalized code of conduct by which to judge them; for the Jew and Christian it would be a memorized version of the 10 Commandments, for the non-Jew it would be his built-in moral code.

At the start of his Roman letter, Paul also references Natural Law in describing what makes certain sexual acts immoral:

Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, gave up natural intercourse with women
Romans 1:26

Natural intercourse is that which we instinctively know to be normal, appropriate.

Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him,
1 Corinthians 11.14

And while we no longer know what he was referring to here, Paul again appealed to Natural Law in his comment on appropriate hair lengths, which on occasion continues to cause many father/son disagreements.

So the Bible does teach that we all are born with an internal moral code by which both we and one day God will judge our actions. This is why the Westminster Confession states:

*God created humanity, with reasoning, immortal souls. He endowed them with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness in his own image and **wrote his law in their hearts.***

(Westminster Confession chapter 4)

But beyond Biblical claims, has the secular world found any evidence of this inbuilt moral law?

One such proof is that as you travel around the world you will find evidence in every healthy culture of a common moral law that is generally recognized and honored by all people. For example most all cultures prohibit murder, theft, and lying [and yet in all

societies those laws have been broken—proof of our struggle with obedience to the law].

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis, illustrates this internal struggle between us and the natural law within us by pointing out that when we argue with one another, eventually one of us appeals to some basic standard of behavior that the other is assumed to recognize:

We say things like this:

- “How’d you like it if someone did the same to you?”
- “That’s my seat, I was there first.”
- “Leave him alone, he isn’t doing you any harm.”
- “What gives you the right to cut in line?”
- “Give me a bit of your orange; I gave you a bit of mine.”
- “Come on, you promised.”

We say things like this every day, educated people as well as uneducated, and children as well as grown-ups. When we make such complaints, we are not merely saying that the other person’s behavior just does not suit us, but rather that the other person’s behavior is wrong, based upon a moral code that we have commonly agreed upon. And this is precisely what Paul is describing here in Romans in reference to all other people, even pagans, having a law within that either accuses or excuses their wrongdoing.

What do you think? Have you ever been aware of this internal version of God’s law accusing or excusing you? Have you ever had a guilty conscience?

This leads us to consider the next thing:

[non-believers] show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which **their own conscience also bears witness**; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them Romans 2:15

Next, Paul supports this idea of our having an internal version of God’s law because our conflicted conscience proves its existence by our own self-accusing or excusing. Some have tried to say this internal moral code is our conscience, (remember the saying “let your conscience be your guide”), but the two are very different parts of our being. **The law** is an objective standard of which we are all instinctively aware; it involves knowledge of what is right or wrong: don’t murder, don’t steal, and don’t lie. And **the**

conscience is that part of our being—the “still small voice”—which tells us we ought to do the right thing and not do the wrong thing.

When Adam and Eve first sinned, they immediately felt guilty about what they had done. Now, also feeling ashamed and naked before the world, they fashioned clothes to hide themselves from each other. Then upon hearing God’s voice they also hid from Him. What caused them to feel this guilt and shame? Their consciences were operating, comparing what they had done with what they had been told not to do, telling them they should feel guilty.

Later Cain became so angry at his brother Abel that he killed him. Although this was long before the Ten Commandments ever stated, “*You shall not murder,*” Cain knew instinctively what he had done was wrong and tried to lie about it when confronted by God.

Once again secular experts also recognize the existence of a human conscience. Dr. Marvin W. Berkowitz, an expert on moral development writes:

“Kids have an internal conscience. It starts developing in the first few years of life and really kicks into high gear around 3 or 4 years of age. Our consciences tell us when we are about to violate (or have violated) our moral code. You can see this even in pre-schoolers who cry at their own selfishness and who try to soothe those they have hurt.” (Sanford N. McDonnell, Professor of Character Education, University of Missouri-St. Louis)

So, along with the moral code that God has written into every heart, He has given us a conscience which reads that code and attempts to direct our life appropriately. Sadly, though as we attempt to suppress our knowledge of God, we also find ways to silence the voice of our conscience; this is what Bible refers to as “hardening your heart.”

Our conscience is like an internal SMOKE DETECTOR. It sets off an inner alarm when the smoke of moral wrong seeps into our thinking. Smoke detectors are nerve-racking when they go off. The noise is unlike any other sound around the house. It shocks us. It grates on the nerves. It pierces the eardrums. But then, that's what a smoke detector is designed to do; alert us of possible danger. But there are also ways to silence that alarm. A battery can be taken out. A wire can be disconnected, or a fuse removed.

As with a smoke detector, some succeed in disconnecting their guilt mechanism. If you continue ignoring your conscience long enough, you will eventually burn out your sin warning mechanism and feel no guilt at all.

Remember the first time you told a lie? You probably felt very bad for telling it. But the next time you told a lie, it became a little easier (that's what it means to harden your heart). We have all known people who were so good at lying they could look you right in the eye and lie without any sign of moral compunction or remorse. They have convinced themselves that telling a lie is actually not so bad.

In 2001, George O'Leary was hired as head football coach for Notre Dame, the job he had always dreamed about having. Five days later, he was fired when it was discovered he lied about his background. He claimed to have received a Masters degree and to have lettered in football three years at New Hampshire. He had neither. Early in his coaching career he fabricated these lies and as the years passed he found it easier and easier to repeat the claims, until someone at Notre Dame checked!

And this brings us back to our original unwise saying. You can let your conscience be your guide only as your conscience has been educated by and remains sensitive to God's moral law both written in your heart—and also taught and explained by your elders. That is why Moses ordered his people to teach the commandments to their children and talk about them at every opportunity.

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.
Deuteronomy 6:6-9

Then as we try and fail to honor God's law both in our hearts and minds, this leads us to conclude with Paul, that

there is no one who is righteous,
not even one.
Romans 3:9

And this finally opens us up to hear God's good news for us.

since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. Romans 3:23-24

That is why the only way we can stand as righteous before God is through our faith in Jesus. So be sure to only let your Biblically educated conscience be your guide to a moral and happy life along with, in your struggle to obey, the growing knowledge of your need for a savior.