

# Should Your Conscience Be Your Guide?

In the Disney film, *Pinocchio*, Jiminy Cricket was entrusted with the task of teaching young Pinocchio how to act. As part of his instruction he sang a song that said, "Always let your conscience be your guide." While this sentiment may make a good song for a children's movie, it is definitely not a principle on which we live our lives. In fact, the Bible teaches us that our consciences are defiled and will inevitably lead us to make decisions that are contrary to God's will.

Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled. Titus 1:15

In order to make decisions that are in line with the will of God we must base decisions on something other than the conscience of our natural man. The Word of God must renew our consciences so that decisions we make keep with God's standard of right and wrong.

## **The Triune Nature of Man**

To understand the conscience of man we must understand the make up of man. We must understand how God created us. The book of Genesis tells us that we are created in God's image.

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. Genesis 1:26,27

Creation in God's image refers not to how God looks but rather to God's very being. God is presented in Scripture as a triune being; one God eternally existing in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. I John 5:7

Man is also presented in scripture as a triune being, one individual existing in three distinct parts; spirit, soul, and body.

And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. I Thessalonians 5:23

As with each part of the Godhead, each part of man has a

unique role to play in the overall existence of the individual.

Man has a body and this body gives man his physical structure and allows him to relate to his environment. This part of man was formed of the dust of the ground.

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. Genesis 2:7

In addition to a body man also has a soul. The soul animates the body of flesh and allows men to relate to one another. The creation of the soul is seen in the passage quoted above. The Scriptures indicate that members of the animal kingdom also have souls. Animal's nostrils contain the breath of life as man's do.

And all flesh died that moved upon the earth, both of fowl, and of cattle, and of beast, and of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth, and every man: All in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of all that was in the dry land, died. Genesis 7:21,22

Finally, man has a spirit. The spirit gives man God consciousness and allows him to relate to a being that he cannot identify with his physical senses.

But there is a spirit in man: and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding. Job 32:8

The ability to comprehend the existence of an invisible God separates man from the animal creation. This is demonstrated by the different responses of man and animals to God's creation.

God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. John 4:24

Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Romans 1:19,20

That which may be known of God is manifested in men, in that men have a spirit. That spirit allows men to look at a creation that they can see and conclude that there must be a creator they can't see. This is the leap of logic that animals can never make. A dog may howl at the moon all night, but he will never consider who put the moon there.

The conscience resides in the spirit of man. The conscience is the internal system of norms and standards

upon which we base decisions in our lives. While the animal creation operates on instinct, man is able to make decisions that are based on information that comes from outside his instinctual nature.

### **Man's Defiled Conscience**

While the Scriptures indicate that mankind has the ability to know God and to understand His will, they also indicate that the natural tendency of man is to ignore God's instruction and rely instead on his own system of evaluation to determine his actions. This truth is painfully apparent from the very beginning of man's existence on earth.

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. Genesis 2:17

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. Genesis 3:6

These passages indicate the difference between God's system of evaluation and man's system of evaluation. God said that man should not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Rather than accepting God's evaluation, Eve evaluated the situation based upon her own conscience. That evaluation consisted of, "the tree was good for food", "the tree was pleasant to the eyes", and "the tree would make one wise". These three observations appealed to Eve's natural desires; "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life". (See I John 2:16.) When Eve evaluated the situation based on her own system of norms and standards she made the wrong choice. This is always the case when man uses his own natural conscience to make decisions.

Poor decision making did not end with Adam and Eve. Man continued to make bad decisions when he relied on his own defiled conscience. The result of man making bad decisions is seen in the condition of the earth just before the flood of Noah.

The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth. And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Genesis 6:11-13

The result of man doing what his conscience dictated is that the earth was filled with violence. Anarchy ruled the day.

Solomon, the wisest man that ever lived, described the folly of a man who follows his own conscience.

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise. Proverbs 12:5

All the ways of a man are clean in his own eyes; but the LORD weigheth the spirits. Proverbs 16:2

Every way of a man is right in his own eyes: but the LORD pondereth the hearts. Proverbs 21:2

The natural conscience of man is not a reliable gauge of right and wrong. Jiminy Cricket gave Pinocchio bad advice. We should NOT allow our conscience to be our guide. When men do that which is right in their own eyes it will inevitably lead them away from God and His truth.

### **What Is Right in God's Eyes**

In the Law of Moses, God established the standard of right behavior in His sight. In His system of norms and standards, God revealed the absolute depravity of man's system of norms and standards.

Ye shall not do after all the things that we do here this day, every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes. Deuteronomy 12:8

And thou shalt do that which is right and good in the sight of the LORD: that it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest go in and possess the good land which the LORD sware unto thy fathers, Deuteronomy 6:18

Observe and hear all these words which I command thee, that it may go well with thee, and with thy children after thee for ever, when thou doest that which is good and right in the sight of the LORD thy God. Deuteronomy 12:28

In the law God told Israel that they should look to Him, not their own consciences, for their standard of right and wrong. Unfortunately, the people of Israel often chose, as did Eve, to evaluate their actions based on their own systems of norms and standards rather than God's.

In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes. Judges 17:6

Eventually even the leadership of Israel forsook God's law in favor of their own defiled consciences.

The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the LORD, and say, Is not the LORD among us? none evil can come upon us. Micah 3:11

Thy princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves: every one loveth gifts, and followeth after rewards: they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them. Isaiah 1:23

The leaders of Israel, charged with judging righteous judgment based on God's law, judged on an altogether different standard, the standard of filthy lucre. This is why the cause of the fatherless and the widow was not heard. The fatherless and the widow were among the poorest in Israel. Because justice was for sale to the highest bidder, they were denied the justice that God's law would have provided.

In his letter to the Romans Paul wrote of the great advantage that the law gave Israel.

Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, And knowest his will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law; And art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness, An instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law. Romans 2:17-20

The law, God's standard of right and wrong, enabled Israel to approve things that are excellent. Approving things that are excellent means making proper choices. God's law gave Israel the ability to make proper choices in every circumstance and situation. With the law they could make choices that were right in God's sight. They could align their system of norms and standards, their consciences, with God's system of norms and standards.

Paul also points out, as do the Old Testament prophets,

that Israel's actions were often directly opposed to the standard of God's law.

Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal? Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery? thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege? Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God? For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you, as it is written. Romans 2:21-24

God revealed His standard of righteousness to the people of Israel and they chose to follow their own standard set by their defiled consciences.

### **A Pure Conscience**

In Paul's epistles, he echoes the statements of other Bible authors in describing the state of man's conscience.

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; I Timothy 4:1,2

Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled. They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate. Titus 1:15,16

Paul also reveals that it is possible to purify our defiled consciences and have them function in line with God's system of norms and standards.

And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day. Acts 23:1

I thank God, whom I serve from my forefathers with pure conscience, that without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day; II Timothy 1:3

In these passages we see that it is possible to have a renewed and purified conscience. Paul was not motivated by the desire for money as were the leaders in Israel. Nor did the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life motivate him as they did Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Paul acted in a positive faith response to the Word of God.

How can we purify our defiled conscience? How can we make our system of norms and standards match God's? The key to a purified conscience is a renewed mind.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. Romans 12:1,2

That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. Ephesians 4:22-24

If we are to renew our mind, how are we to renew it? Our natural defiled mind must be renewed with the mind of Christ. Fortunately, God has given us access to the mind of Christ by giving us His Word.

But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ. I Corinthians 2:9-16

Just as He did for Israel, God has given us the ability to know what is right in His eyes. He has revealed to us His will. As we fill our minds with the knowledge of God's will as revealed in His Word, our conscience will be purified and we will make wise decisions and approve things that are excellent.

For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; Colossians 1:9,10

And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; Philippians 1:9,10

As we grow in the knowledge of God and His will we grow in our ability to make wise decisions.

### **Should Your Conscience Be Your Guide?**

Earlier in this article we stated that Jiminy Cricket was wrong in his advice to Pinocchio when he told him to allow his conscience to be his guide. As we close the article we must point out an exception to that rule. While it is true that the natural defiled conscience of man is not a reliable guide to right and wrong, it is also true that man's defiled conscience can be renewed and purified. A renewed conscience, a conscience that has been aligned with the mind of Christ does serve as an effective guide to right and wrong. In order to keep our conscience pure we must continually study the Word of God so that our system of norms and standards is always adjusted to match His system of norms and standards. It only takes a short time away from God's truth for our conscience to begin to revert back to its defiled condition. Jiminy Cricket's advice to Pinocchio should have been to renew his mind through the study of God's Word and then to allow his purified conscience to be his guide.

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