**THE CONSCIENCE** By Ray Ferris (1923 – 2016)

If one were to take four watches, one with the right time, one an hour fast, one an hour slow, and one that is stopped, he might compare them to four types of conscience. One is by the right standard - it operates correctly; two are by wrong standards - one operates too loosely and is thus too fast, and one is too binding and is thus too slow; the fourth is by no standard at all. It just doesn't operate. Just what is the condition of your conscience?

The word is formed by a combination of two words in the original language of the New Testament ­ one being a word that means with and the other a word which means knowledge. It thus conveys the sense of knowing with oneself. Webster says, "a knowledge or feeling of right and wrong, with a compulsion to do right; moral judgment that prohibits or opposes the violation of a previously recognized ethical principle" (*Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, p.312).

Paul writes of the conscience accusing or excusing (Rom. 2:15). Thus the conscience is that which we know within ourselves to measure up to a standard previously established in some way in our thinking. It is the built-in judge that exists in every man. If improper knowledge exists in an individual he may condemn that which is acceptable, or he may approve that which should be condemned. Study Romans 14 to see this principle illustrated.

***Your Conscience***
But what of your conscience? Is it one that has been formed and guided to the proper standard by God's word? Or is it one that permits you to go beyond what God would desire due to failure to concentrate on His will? It is entirely possible that it is one that of such possibility ought to motivate us to a fervent study and constant consideration of God's word.

It is also possible that one's conscience will allow that which ought not to be done with no judgment of wrongdoing. Paul said, "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbles, or is made weak. Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he that condemns not himself in that thing which he allows" (Rom. 14:21-22).

Note that a conscience that does not condemn us in some practice does not guarantee the practice to be right. We are happy (blessed) when what is allowed does not condemn us! The Christian had best be very careful what practices are approved in his life.

Perhaps your conscience has, in essence, ceased to function at all. We read of those who are guilty of "speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron..." (1 Tim. 4:2). We also read of people whose consciences were defiled (Tit. 1: 15). These passages indicate consciences that are not working. Is it possible for that to be true of you?

***Assurance or Condemnation***
The conscience is a vital aspect of the Christian's effort to please God. John said, "And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him. For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things" (1 Jn. 3: 19-20). Paul wrote, "And he that doubts is damned if he eat, because he eats not in faith: for God hath received him" (Rom. 14:23.

The basis of the sin is the self-accusation of one's own conscience which condemns him as one who rebels against what he believes to be God's will. The very spirit of rebellion is something which cannot be condoned. John says God, being greater than one's heart, recognizes the rebellious spirit. It is impossible for me to expect the Lord to approve of me when I do not approve of myself.

May the Lord help us to develop a proper conscience that will restrain us from any activity that would displease God, and motivate us always to be involved in active good.

Once more we quote from the pen of Paul: "But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things written in the law and in the prophets: and have hope toward God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust. And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men" (Ac. 24:14-16).

The Spirit-inspired apostle exercised himself (that surely implies that he worked at the task) so that his conscience would not accuse him of doing what he believed to be wrong.

***Conclusion***
Remember, failure to be convicted of sin by one's conscience does not guarantee that one is right, as illustrated by Paul's life when he persecuted Christians in all good conscience. He said: "I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Ac. 26:9).

On another occasion he indicated that even while engaged in those acts, he had "lived in all good conscience before God until this day" (Ac. 23:1).

On the other hand, conviction by one's conscience that he is not doing right guarantees that he is sinning! God will condemn him.

May the Lord help us then to exercise ourselves that we may have a good conscience, but that we also constantly seek to educate ourselves so the conscience will judge our actions aright.

This article was first published in THINK, Vol. 29, No. 4, July, 1998