

Thankful That Conscience Isn't the Last Word

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For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
- Isaiah 55:8

One of the problems in Bible study is refining what we're talking about. For example, in the scripture above, which burdens are these?

To do the right thing seems at times to be a burden. It's easier, less costly, not to. But that can't be it. No way would Jesus tell us not to do the right thing, or not do his Father's will, or not keep the commandments, or not do our duty, no matter how difficult. Jesus is not talking about bearing the weight of faithfulness.

One way to refine our focus in Bible study is to look at the teachings or stories in close proximity to the one we're dealing with. See if there's a theme or concern that each is dealing with in its own way. The biblical writers at times lump-related matters together.

Prior to Mt. 11: 28-32, above, Jesus says that the knowledge of God has been revealed to him, and through him to whomever he chooses. He also says that the knowledge of God has been hidden from "the wise."

There were people in Jesus' day who thought they were wise when it came to the knowledge of God. For example, the Pharisees thought they were the "bees knees" when it came to the ABC's of a Godly life. And, surprise, surprise, the Pharisees show up in the story immediately following Mt. 11:28-32.

And what do they do? They criticize Jesus and his disciples, who were walking through grain fields, for plucking heads of grain to eat. The Pharisees' interpretation of the commandment, "Thou shalt remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy," was that you could only walk a few steps from your house on the Sabbath, else it was unholy work. And you couldn't light a fire to prepare a meal, or it would be unholy work. (You could eat if it was prepared the day before.) And you couldn't rescue your nanny goat if it fell in a pit. And so on.

The Sabbath day, marked from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, was given as a day of rest. Other cultures worked every day. This slavishness wasn't good, wasn't healthy. Break up the calendar with a day per week not devoted to making a living. Trust in God. Acknowledge that all good things come from God.

Rest is good. But people have to eat. Emergencies don't take a day off. And maybe there's no other time of the week to visit family and neighbors.

In any event, Jesus answered his critics with an example – King David and his men, who broke into the Temple and ate the 'bread of the presence.' (A much bigger no-no than eating granola.) Furthermore, he claims that he is Lord of the Sabbath. God means the Sabbath for the benefit of humankind, not humankind for the benefit of the Sabbath. Jab that in your life raft and deflate it!

How would we apply this story to life today? Jesus dealt with know-it-alls who laid burdens on others, saying, this is God's way. It's mandatory that you live this way. Obviously, religious restrictions are not so much our problem today. But we do live among people, corporations, media, schools and universities, etc., that pressure us to conform to their idea of what constitutes the "good life." You have to have this... This is the mark of a good parent... This is how you should think.

But in many instances, these voices merely want to sell us something. In others, they know that what they are saying is harmful rather than helpful. They want to keep us in our place, lest we threaten their position of privilege. And rarely do these voices even pretend to be connected to God. Jesus's voice is not being heard when greed, sex, violence, and power are worshiped.

It is a burden to be something other than the human beings God created us to be. But almost everywhere we turn, we are tempted or pressured to be something less. And these foolish expectations can wear us down.

There's a better way. Tune the other voices out. *Come to me... and I will give you rest.* Recently Larry Barker did an investigative report on unsafe garbage trucks put on city streets by the city of Santa Fe. And what he said is right. "It's unconscionable."

The word "unconscionable" reminded me of an incident that happened in Santa Fe back in the early 1990s. Two young men, who had murdered four people in the commission of robberies in the Midwest, were caught in our state capitol. Lots of media attention. One side story had to do with a third young man who was supposed to have accompanied the two. His girlfriend threw a fit and made him stay home. Interviewed after the capture of his two friends, he could not believe they had committed the murders. He said, "It's okay to rob those people, but they shouldn't have killed them."

This young man and countless other statements make me question the alleged wisdom that says, "*Let your conscience be your guide.*"

How we ever got such false wisdom I'm not sure, but I understand it goes something like this. For many centuries, we Christians thought of the conscience as a divinely installed regulatory device. Its job is to remind us of our Christian duties and bother us when we commit a wrong or omit the doing of a right.

But then we noticed that people in every culture and of every religion also have a conscience – Hindus, Muslims, atheists, Russians, etc. Not exactly like that of a Christian, but not exactly different, either. Furthermore, we began questioning what it means to think of one's conscience as divinely installed. Is saying that God gives us a conscience no different from saying God gives us an elbow? We have the conscience God gave us. It works as God intends. There's nothing we can do about it?

Time passes. For some time now it has been understood that conscience is not divinely installed. It is something that develops within us. And how it develops is largely a product of the society in which we live – family, schools, friends, books, television, music, movies, on-the-job concerns, neighborhood, churches, voluntary organizations, etc. We have consciences developed in large measure by modern American culture. And therein we have big problems.

Take, for example, children and youth. Not only are kids not going to church as in times past, they aren't being exposed to good values and good examples as in times past. Allan Blume, in his book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, laments how the concerns that went into the formation of human consciences in the past are no longer being raised much anywhere. In his college classes, he raised issues that philosophers and poets and religions have wrestled with forever, only to have students dismiss these concerns with, "It's no big deal." (And he wrote this book in 1987. How much less a big deal is it with students today?)

By its very nature the church has always been in the conscience-shaping business. But in a strange way. The word *conscience* does not appear in the Old Testament. The law and the prophets simply call for obedience to the Lord. Nor does the word appear in any of the gospels in the New Testament. Again, through Christ we're to be obedient

to our Heavenly Father. *Conscience* appears around 30 times in the New Testament, mostly in the writings of Paul. Why? Because he was attempting to evangelize Gentiles (non-Jews), and to do that he had to use their language. And one term that originated in the Hellenistic culture of the Mediterranean was *conscience*.

Still, Paul recognized the word's limitations. In 1 Corinthians 4:4, he says, "My *conscience* is clear, but that does not prove that I am really innocent. The Lord is the one who passes judgment on me." (GNB)

Presently, relatively few people have a conscience that expects much of them when it comes to how they treat others. Certainly not a conscience equal to what God expects. *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. (Isaiah 55:8)* Thus, one thing I'm thankful for this Thanksgiving is that conscience doesn't rule this world, and conscience isn't the last word. All human beings are ultimately responsible to the Lord for our words and actions. God isn't finished with us yet. God will still be there when it is fully realized that the only worlds we create apart from God's guidance are those not worth living in.