

Principle Four

CHILDREN ARE ENDOWED WITH A GUIDING FORCE: THE CONSCIENCE

The universe around us is abundant with signs of divine direction, order, and uniformity. While some of us may abandon life in despair or depression, the life around us goes on--growing, blooming, bearing fruit, building nests, spinning webs, spawning, teaching, protecting, exploring, conquering. Each particle of life, from the microscopic to the macroscopic, has plan and purpose. Each has a career--a profession--and pursues it with unwavering dedication.

There should be no doubt in our minds that the Creator of this life--with all of its bustling activity and plan--has a purpose for man, a purpose that extends beyond mortal view. We, like the living entities around us, come instilled with the similar instinct to sustain life--our own and that of our young--yet, man is endowed with an inner directive which reaches beyond mere physical maintenance. As children of God we have been given a light within to guide us home to our divine destinies, for just as man is endowed with the ability to choose, so also is he endowed with a guiding force by which to make the wise choices that will lead to happiness here and hereafter. This innate guide is called conscience. Thomas Jefferson said, "I believe that justice is instinct and innate, that the moral sense is as much a part of our constitution as that of feeling, seeing or hearing."

The Universal Law of Ethics

The belief in the conscience is of course based upon the premise that, just as there are universal laws in the scientific world, there are

universal laws of ethics--or moral laws--that can be discovered through right reasoning. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis uses reasoning to verify the existence of a universal conscience:

Everyone has heard people quarreling. Sometimes it sounds funny and sometimes it sounds merely unpleasant; but however it sounds, I believe we can learn something very important from listening to the kinds of things they say. They say things like this: how'd you like it if anyone did the same to you--That's my seat; I was there first--Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm--Why should you shove in first--Give me a bite of your orange, I gave you a bite of mine--Come on, you promised.

People say things like that every day. Now what interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them is not merely saying that the other man's behavior does not happen to please him. He is appealing to some kind of standard of behavior, which he expects the other man to know about. And the other man very seldom replies, 'To hell with your standard.'

It looks, in fact, very much as if both parties had in mind some kind of Law or Rule of fair play or decent behavior or morality or whatever you like to call it, about which they really agreed. . .Think of a country where people were admired for running away in battle, or where a man felt proud of double-crossing all the people who had been kindest to him. You might as well try to imagine a country where two and two made five. . .It seems then, we are forced to believe in a real Right and Wrong. . .The only way in which (a controlling power) could. . .show itself would be inside ourselves as an influence or command trying to get us to behave in a certain way. And that is just what we do find inside ourselves.

Conscience Guides to a More Abundant Life

The goal of the conscience is not merely conformity to law--or a moral sense--but conformity to life. It is a sensor, which teaches the best course through life, the sure way. It whispers no to those behaviors that will be destructive to man's happiness and whispers yes to those that will enhance it. The conscience works similar to the pleasure-pain mechanism of the physical body. When we touch a hot stove, the brain will register pain so that the finger will withdraw and protect itself from ultimate destruction. It is, in a sense, a safety device to protect the physical body. In this same way, when we do something that is destructive to the spiritual nature, a mechanism within will respond with feelings of sadness, uneasiness, anxiety, even pain. The conscience is therefore a safety gauge for the spiritual well being.

Yet, the soft-spoken conscience can be silenced when it is ignored. As the Christian writer Henry Drummond said, "Sin is manifest in the true character when the demand of holiness or conscience presenting itself to the man. . .is put from him with aversion. Sin is simply apostasy from God--unbelief in God." (*Natural Law in the Spiritual World* p. 246.) For those who, in their contempt and disregard for this innate voice, have turned deaf ears to its guidance there is a decrease in the vitality of life and sensitivities of the heart. Hardened criminals adopt such moral values as: Do it to them before they do it to you. . .He deserved what he got. . .Why should I care? She was just an ol' lady. . .You either take or be taken. The very expression hardened criminal indicates callousness, a hard heart, and insensitivity to human emotions. They lack remorse or sorrow because there is no longer any reason to care. The innate conscience can be intensified or suppressed--to ignore the counsel initiates a desensitization process, which, if continued, can eventually kill the conscience.

Killing the conscience stifles a major part of any human being; what is left is little better than a zombie. In desperation such creatures reach beyond themselves to feel alive again--taking drugs to increase sensations, driving fast, living fast, grabbing the sensual,

the sensational, the bright, the loud, the violent, the big, the important. In their comatose state they want--passionately, urgently--to be awakened, to be able to feel love and life again. In their craving for life, they leave it behind and no longer remember the period in their own past when life was at its sweetest: childhood.

Surely our Father knew his business when he arranged for each of us to enjoy a period of time when, free of responsibilities, we could spend all our time marveling at the wonders around us. By its nature, childhood is miraculous--a time when the universe can be captured in the palm of a tiny chubby hand, when life is abundantly vivid, when colors are iridescent, flowers amazing, water totally and absolutely fascinating--to drink, to pour, to splash, to swim. It is a time of simplicity, when sand is the ultimate plaything, when animals can communicate, when neighbors are a part of the family, when love notes are the only theme for writing, and when chicken noodle soup and crackers are everything one could wish for to eat. Even Adam and Eve, endowed from the beginning with adult bodies, began their existence with a season of innocence with the splendor of Eden. Each of us needs a childhood, not simply for its aesthetic wonder, but as a measuring stick for our appreciation of life.

Children are filled with wonder and gratitude for the little things that their parents hardly notice. Recently, our Jessica, age three, said, "Mommy, I'm hungry." I warmed some leftover chicken stew. While she ate, she said over and over, "Thank you, Mommy." About every three minutes she would lean over and kiss me on each cheek and on the knee! What a lesson in reverence for life and everything in it!

I recently gave the family a lesson on the concept of the conscience and asked the children to describe the feelings that result when the conscience is violated. The responses were interesting: emotional pain, unhappiness, stress, burdened, distant, nervousness, and a heavy, dark sensation.

In little children, especially, the conscience is extremely sensitive. In fact, I have found that it is usually impossible for children to go against it without severe internal conflict. One time I needed to go through some papers I had stored in another building on our property.

As I left the house I said to our four-year-old, Micah, “Remember, the cookies are for lunches; you’re not to eat them.”

He came with me but after a while needed to go back to the house to get something. When he returned, he came through the door with the insecure look of an unsettled conscience and asked, “Do you smell cookies?” I asked, “Why, did you eat some?” Sheepishly he looked at me as if to say, how did you find out, and answered, “Only four”.

We have discovered that it is almost impossible to play hide-and-seek with little ones. They cannot keep a secret. “He’s in the closet.”

Little ones seem to hurt physically as well as emotionally when they have erred; therefore, it is important to minimize what they usually maximize. Our daughter, Jessica, is so sensitive that she will immediately say, I’m sorry! when she has erred. I usually say, “It’s O.K. I’m glad that you are sorry; it makes it better.” If the goal of parenting is to train up a child who will one day make correct decisions based upon a vibrant, sensitive conscience, it is vitally important to increase this endowment from God.

Life, Love, Joy, and Freedom

As I mentioned earlier, I have come to the conclusion that there are four basic qualities of character in man: life, love, joy, and freedom. The conscience, if followed, will lead one to greater life, love, joy, and freedom--all of which are character traits of a person with integrity, who has so harnessed the laws of good and successful living. Such a person not only obeys God and the laws of successful living but also totally agrees with them. Such a person is free from false motives, false fronts, false perceptions, and false foundations and is therefore at liberty to love and enjoy life to its fullest extent. Robert Bolt, the author of *A Man For All Seasons*, describes such a person when referring to Sir Thomas More,

What first attracted me was a person who could not be accused of any incapacity for life, who indeed seized life in great variety and almost greedy quantities, who

nevertheless found something in himself without which life was valueless and when that was denied him was able to grasp his death. As I wrote about him, [he] became for me a man with an adamant sense of self. He knew where he began and left off, what area of himself he could yield to the encroachments of his enemies, and what to the encroachments of those he loved. It was a substantial area in both cases, for he had a proper sense of fear and was a busy lover. Since he was a clever man and a great lawyer he was able to retire from those areas in wonderfully good order, but at length he was asked to retreat from that final area where he located his self. And there this supple, humorous, unassuming and sophisticated person set like metal, was overtaken by an absolutely primitive rigor, and could no more be budged than a cliff.

The Right of Conscience

The idea that man has an innate ability to determine what is right, good, and in his best interest was an accepted reality to early Americans. George Washington wrote, "Labor to keep alive in your heart that little spark of celestial fire called conscience. . . While we are contending for our own Liberty, we should be cautious of violating the Right of Conscience."

The Founding Fathers recognized the delicate balance between not enough law to stabilize society and too much law, which would stifle man's freedoms and right of conscience. In other words, when man must look to the law to discover what is right, the law has gone too far. Consequently, the Founders set out to form a government that would set men free to follow their own personal consciences, yet at the same time establish justice and domestic tranquility. Parents are faced with the same challenge--to dominate the conscience with law would suppress the delicacy of it, while to govern with too little law would result in chaos and insecurity.

The Enlightened Conscience Versus the Conditioned Conscience

While each of us could testify to an awareness of this power of direction, it is important to realize that our conscience can be affected by environmental and cultural conditions. There are influences that either suppress or enhance the conscience, such as family tradition, and societal conditioning. Consequently, the influences of society can nullify the divine or enlightened conscience and replace it with a conditioned conscience. An enlightened conscience can be defined as one vibrant with inner truth and added upon by additional insights, understanding, and wisdom. On the other hand, the conditioned conscience would be one, which has been affected adversely by societal conditioning.

In his book *The Divine Center*, Stephen R. Covey makes the observation:

In a fundamental sense we have two consciences, a divine one and a social one. The divine one is the true one. . . the light God has given to every person who comes into the world. The social one is also given to us, but this one comes from our human experiences--our upbringing, the culture surrounding us, made up of norms, mores, traditions, values, beliefs--and from the level of our obedience to the divine conscience. If we do not obey that conscience it is gradually subordinated, then eventually eliminated, and replaced by the social one. Whatever the focus and content of this social one is will be the center of that person's life and the primary source of his security, wisdom, guidance, and power. (p. 260)

As an example, when Adolf Hitler reigned in Germany he implanted within the people the idea that the Jewish people were the chaff of the world. Consequently, many of the people acted upon that conditioned value through persecution, alienation, even extermination of the Jewish people. I recently met with a Jewish man who had lived

through the conditioning process. He recalls when his people were first required to wear the Star of David as a symbol of pride. Later, signs appeared in various stores stating, No Jews Allowed. Still later, Jews were hauled off in cattle cars to the ovens and gas chambers. It was a gradual process of societal conditioning that caused many of the Germans to accept what their natural consciences would have rejected.

Similar examples of this process--the corruption of the conscience--exist throughout history. And children, who in their innocence and humility are so readily influenced, receive the brunt of this destructive conditioning. In the novel *Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain, we observe this dilemma in Tom. While his enlightened conscience tells him that it is all right--even good--to be friends with Jim, a black slave in the community, his conditioned conscience battles with the idea that it is improper for him to associate on such an intimate basis with someone of this race. He wrestles with both, and then comes to the conclusion that he will be Jim's friend, despite his belief that he will probably "go to hell for it."

In the maze of it all, it is likely that each of us suffers false pangs of the conscience. We feel guilty for being wives and homemakers; we feel guilty for leaving home to go to work. We feel guilty for not dieting and taking an aerobic dance class; we feel guilty when we leave our families to take such a class. We feel guilty for having children; we feel guilty for not having children! Reeling to and fro with such guilt can cause the delicate mechanism to malfunction. The answer is to determine clearly, by the heart, mind and spirit, what is right and good for ourselves.

The Savior warned his followers of "false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves" (Matthew 7:15). Through their subtlety, such prophets can and do outline, neatly and convincingly, moral foundations for the causes of alienation, theft, abuse, slavery, abortion, and murder!

Parents must beware of this external conditioning process upon the child and counteract its influences with honest, open communication and frequent instruction. Those who neglect this responsibility take frightening risks with the well being of their

children. (Means of fulfilling this responsibility are discussed at length in principle five.)

Enlightened Conscience Retains Natural Goodwill

While a parent may mandate an outward show of goodwill, what happens on the inside is entirely up to the child. Tools of force, coercion, or manipulation--however harsh or lasting--cannot produce a vibrant heart filled with love, spontaneity, freedom, compassion, tolerance, tenderness, concern, understanding, and empathy. And heaven forbid that parents, society, friends, or institutions be permitted to rob children of their right to conscience, making of them rubber stamps of others' idea of truth and right! Why would this be so disastrous? Because true integrity--and, consequently, freedom of soul and individuality--cannot follow on the heels of compliance. It is only won through devotion, sacrifice, and total commitment to the quest of acquiring truth. It must come from the inside out. There are those who have relinquished their right to conscience and reason. The world for them is a theater in which they act out carefully studied parts. Believing blind obedience to be a virtue, they never question. In their own words, they have never doubted for a moment. But doubt is the first step on the road to true integrity of soul: those who doubt discover. Those who have dammed this natural instinct to investigate and experiment do so at the sacrifice of their very souls.

Lowell Bennion has said,

Religion is a fruitful field in which to plant the seeds of hypocrisy. It is so easy to pretend, to feign virtue when we do not feel it. . . This duplicity of interest when it occurs destroys the integrity of the religious life. One way to avoid hypocrisy is to become converted, to be whole souled in what we do, and to live whatever principle freely, spontaneously for the sheer love of doing it.

Might some expressions of hypocrisy in our own religious living be suggested by the following questions:

1. Do [I] do things to be seen of men--the clergy, my children, my neighbors?
2. Do [I] love the chief seats? (The honors of men.)
3. Do [I] give lip service to the ideals and principles, which I do not earnestly practice?
4. Do [I] behold the mote in my brother's eye when there is a beam in my own?
5. Do [I] ever play the role of actor in religion rather than live it for the right reason?"

If we can do nothing more than feign the practices of being a good Christians--love, gentleness, kindness, thoughtfulness--the gospel is a fraud--nothing more than a set up to produce clones, robots, and great pretenders! And yet, the reality is that the Christian life is truly genuine and attainable--when, in barefaced honesty, one realizes that only through Jesus Christ himself is it attainable. How dangerous it is, then, to teach our children to look to ourselves, or to the law, or to merely the organization of the church, or to the people in the church, rather than to Christ!

Summary

With the realization that there can be no mere indoctrination of the law, since all law is preceded by the desires of the heart, the objective becomes a spontaneity of living and loving that is rooted in a good heart and a strong mind. Good is not conformity to law; good is conformity to life. Good works done in the name of the law only, become sour grapes, cloaked in self-righteousness, pride, jealousy, narrow-mindedness, and arrogance. For this reason--amid a hundred more—it is crucial that the parent nurture, and encourage the child's right of conscience and free will.

___ Obviously, this presents a real challenge for parents-- to insure that the child's basic, innate conscience is protected from corruption and strengthened by wisdom, understanding, and eternal truths.

If properly safeguarded, the child's right to freedom of conscience can actually be the parents' ally in working toward a more unified home. The whisperings of an enlightened conscience are far more powerful in directing a child's course of action than any orders a parent can issue or hope to enforce. If parents can keep unsound influences from corrupting this inborn directive system while allowing it plenty of freedom in which to work, the child will gain valuable experience and insight as he moves toward maturity and self-government.

Principle In Action

Examples of parental approaches that respect the child's right of conscience would be:

1. What do you think would be the right thing to do?
2. Why do you suppose it is not right to steal this gum?
3. Listen to your best self. What does it tell you to do?
4. I know that you know what is right to do, and that you'll make the right decision.
5. I trust you.
6. How can I help you with this problem?
7. What do you suggest?
8. I know that you would want me to remind you that it is your sister's birthday this Sunday.
9. You love your sister; I know that you didn't mean to say the things that you did. What could you do to help her feel better?

Examples of approaches that show insensitivity to the child's conscience include:

1. Because I said so, that's why. . .
2. It is not right; now go and take the gum back to the store and tell the clerk that you are sorry and that you'll never do it again. And if you don't you'll really get a spanking.
3. I know that we haven't talked this over with you, but we've decided that it is not best for you to. . .

4. It's your sister's birthday and if you don't get her a present you won't be able to go with the family for pizza. Besides that you'll be put on restriction.

5. I've told you a thousand times; if you're not good to your sister you're going to get the spanking of your life.

6. Either share your toys or I'll take them back to the store.

7. I told your sister-in-law that you would be happy to let her use your baby things.

8. You just listen to me!

9. We are going to have a family with love and cooperation come hell or high water!

Anna, age eleven, had spent the night with a friend and promised that she would be home by eleven o'clock in the morning to assist in the planting of the family garden. At eleven-thirty I called to see why she was not home yet. She said, "Everyone is still asleep around here. We haven't even had breakfast. And she and I haven't had a chance to play."

"Well," I answered, "I can understand that, but what about your promise to be home at eleven?"

"I'll come home in the afternoon."

"But we'll be through planting by then--and besides, it'll be too warm to work in the garden."

"Well, I don't want to leave now," she complained.

"You could go back over to her house after you finish helping," I responded.

"Mother, I don't want to go home."

"Well, what do you suggest?" I asked.

I waited for her response; finally she answered, "Can I come home after breakfast, help with the garden, then come back here?"

"O.K.," I answered. "That sounds great."

She returned home within the hour and assisted the family in planting the garden, then returned to her friend's home. It was her

decision--her evaluation of what was fair both to her family and to herself.