

LESSON 3

CONSCIENCE: GOD'S LAW IN OUR HEARTS

BACKGROUND READING



In our lives we make choices that either lead us on the path toward Heaven or the path of slavery and death in sin. To choose implies freedom of the will. In order for our choices between good and evil to mean something—for them to be moral choices—we must be free in our choice. Free will is a gift from God Himself and is a faculty or ability of the soul. It is one of the ways in which we are made in the image and likeness of God. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines freedom as “the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one’s own responsibility” (CCC 1731). God respects our dignity by allowing us to be in control of our actions and responsible for our choices.

The Freedom to Choose

Today’s culture defines freedom as being able to do whatever we feel like doing whenever we want. We often hear people defending their actions (even though they frequently are immoral) by declaring that they are “free” to do as they wish. As parents we all have experienced, at one time or another, our children saying (or at least implying) “you can’t make me do that!” But this attitude toward freedom is actually an

abuse of the God-given gift of our free will. The *Catechism* tells us that “freedom is a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness; it attains its perfection when directed toward God, our beatitude” (CCC 1731).

Since God created us, He knows what is good for us. We find our ultimate happiness growing in holiness to become closer to Him. We find true freedom growing in truth and goodness because that ultimately fulfills our human nature, making us freer to be who we are meant to be. Choosing sin leads us into slavery, the slavery of losing control to our passions, addictions, and selfishness. We become less than what we were created to be. The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. To first start this process of choosing what is good requires faith. But then we find that true freedom is not to do whatever we desire, but rather it is freedom for growth in holiness and goodness in relationship with our God.

Conscience: God’s Voice Within

God knows that choosing the good is not always easy for us. He knows that we are attracted to sin and that the right choices are not always clear. So, to help us, God wrote His law within the heart of every single human person. This

gift of His law is called a conscience. Our conscience guides us in making judgments or choices that lead us to the good. When we choose the good our conscience confirms that we are acting according to God's will. When we choose evil, then our conscience tells us that we were wrong.

Our conscience, however, doesn't work like magic. It doesn't tell us the difference between right or wrong with no effort on our part. In fact, it is possible to leave our conscience undeveloped, like it is sleeping, and it is even possible to form a bad conscience. That is why it is our moral obligation to form our consciences according to the truth.

Making good moral choices takes lots of training and study. After all, just because a baby comes into this world with legs, doesn't mean that she can walk. A baby needs to first learn to stand, then to walk, then to run. So it is with our conscience. We must spend time, study, and pray continuously in order to rightly form our conscience. Indeed, the formation of our conscience is a lifelong job.

The Moral Formation of Conscience

What are the helps that God has given us in order that we might rightly form our conscience? They are the "signs along the way" that we are studying this year. In the Psalms we pray, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105). In the Word of God we find the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, as well as the teachings of the Apostles. We must accept God's Word in faith, and then respond with a life of prayer – talking with and listening to God.

Good habits or rules for developing a moral conscience are:

- ▶ Examining our conscience daily (reflecting on the good and bad actions

we have committed throughout the day).

- ▶ Praying for and developing the Gifts of the Holy Spirit we received in Baptism and Confirmation.
- ▶ Seeking the advice of holy, virtuous people we respect.
- ▶ Always allowing our understanding to be guided by the teaching authority of the Church.

After we have learned God's ways, then we must put into practice what we have learned. This process is how virtue is formed in our lives, and these virtues enable us to make better and better choices.

Other rules that help us to discern if an action is moral or immoral are:

- ▶ You may never do evil so that good may come about (the end does not justify the means).
- ▶ You should always follow the Golden Rule (do unto others what you would have them do unto you).
- ▶ You must always be guided by charity and respect for your neighbor and his conscience (cf. CCC 1789).

Whenever we are certain that what our conscience is telling us is the right and just thing to do, we must act according to its dictates. Human persons must always be free to choose in accordance with their conscience. To force a person to act contrary to his or her conscience violates the dignity that belongs to everyone made in the image and likeness of God.

We must not squander the gifts God has given us. Our grateful response to the law He has written in our hearts is to live lives that listen for His voice. We can give God back the gift of our complete trust in His Word because we know that Christ will always call us to Life in Himself.