



**"The Human Conscience"**  
**Scripture – Romans 2:12-16**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, October 25, 2020**

This is a true story about three young boys, ages 5, 6, and 7 who were playing together one afternoon. All was fine until the six year-old lost his temper and shoved the younger, smaller boy to the ground with a firm thrust. The seven year-old reacted by giving the six year-old a forceful push to the ground. However, just as he gave him a taste of his own medicine, the mothers of both boys looked up to see only the second act of aggression.

The mother of the oldest boy tore into him with an immediate spanking. Once he ceased crying and calmed down, he recounted the entire scene for his mother. When she realized that what she had witnessed was not her son bullying a younger boy, but rather her son standing up for the smallest child, she felt guilty for delivering the punishment.

Why did the seven year-old stand up for the most vulnerable one? Because his conscience flared. A voice from within shouted "Unfair!" The young boy was being mistreated and needed someone to intervene. The oldest boy responded to his inner voice summoning him to charge to the rescue of the victim.

Why did his mother light into him? Because of her conscience. Her inner light told her that her son's behavior was out of bounds. However, her conscience was not finished with her. Once she understood the whole sequence of events, a judgmental voice from within declared her guilty for applying an unfair punishment and she apologized over and over.

Our conscience is that part of us that gives us a sense of what is right and what is wrong. It often motivates us to do what we judge to be fair and just. Our conscience also makes us feel guilty when we do something wrong or fail to do what is right. I chose today's passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans because in these verses, Paul focuses on the human conscience.

You remember that Paul was a Pharisee, someone schooled in the Torah and who lived his life according to its commandments. Do you know how many commandments are in the Jewish Scriptures? There are 613; and you thought I had too many rules for in-person worship!

Paul was determined to live a blameless life by fulfilling every single one of these laws. In today's passage, Paul talks about the importance of living an obedient life because it puts us right with God, creates a rich life, and lays the foundation for an orderly society. He says, "For it is not those who *hear* the law who are righteous in God's

sight, but it is those who *obey* the law who will be declared righteous." It is one thing to know the law, but we know what really counts is to carry it out.

However, Paul has begun to spread the Christian gospel beyond Jews to Gentiles. So the obvious question that emerged was: What about the Gentiles who are not required to follow Jewish laws? Paul says that their *consciences* tell them what is right and wrong. He explains, "the requirements of the law are written on their hearts."

I like the way the Message version of the Bible states this. It says: "There is something deep within them that echoes God's yes and no, right and wrong."

When we see someone in need, something inside of us urges us to help. Perhaps a whisper somewhere between our unconscious and our fully conscious self says, "Be a good Samaritan," or "Treat others the way you want to be treated."

Sometimes it is more of a feeling than words. Most people seem to have a built-in sense of what is fair and what is unfair.

Evolutionary anthropologist, Katharina Hamann, studies human behavior. In 2011 she conducted a study of two and three years-old. She had them pull ropes at either end of a long board. "When the children started pulling the ropes, two pieces of their reward (marbles) sat at each end of the board. But as they pulled, one marble rolled from one end to the other. So one child ended up with three marbles and the other only one. The children who received the extra marbles returned them to their partners three out of four times,"<sup>1</sup> so that each of them again had two. It suggests that the majority of very young children thought that was what was fair. Even at that very young age, most of the children appeared to have a moral compass that guided them to what was right.

Many think of conscience as an "internal regulator of morals"<sup>2</sup> – a knowledge of right and wrong that is inherent in all people. Mahatma Gandhi said, "There is a higher court than the courts of justice, and that is the court of conscience. It supersedes all other courts."

For those with a good conscience, that is spot on. However, we know that not everyone is driven by a good conscience. Some seem devoid of an inner voice that urges them to have empathy for people in need and a sense of what is fair and just. Some can lie without a twinge of guilt. A narcissist who was devoid of a conscience, Adolf Hitler, said, "Conscience is a Jewish invention." Regrettably, some people are so self-absorbed, they judge not by what is right and fair and supports the society at large, but only by what promotes their ego.

If that were the case with everyone, society would be in constant chaos as each of us fought to bolster our insecure self at the expense of the common good.

Do you remember Amy Cooper? She is the woman who refused to put her dog on a leash in New York's Central Park, and when Christian Cooper, a black man asked her to do so and began to video the dog off its leash, she called the police and said that an African American man was threatening her. The video of the incident that went viral showed that he was doing nothing threatening.

The court of public opinion came down hard. The woman was ousted from her job and her reputation was sullied. In addition, she was charged by the Manhattan district attorney for filing a false police report. However, the man she accused chose not to aid the investigation.

He explained his position in an op-ed for the *Washington Post*. He thought it was a mistake to focus on one individual because “the incident highlighted the long-standing, deep-seated racial bias against black and brown (people) that permeates the United States... (it was) surprising to no one that the police might come charging to her aid with special vengeance on hearing that an African American was involved.”

He went on to say, “I believe in punishments that are commensurate with the wrongdoing. Considering that Amy Cooper has already lost her job and her reputation, it’s hard to see what is to be gained by a criminal charge, aside from the upholding of principle.”

What is relevant to our focus on conscience is his belief that the punishment should be proportionate to the crime. That is, in any particular situation, what most people would deem as fair. And then, he ends his piece on why he does not want any further punishment meted out on her with this sentence. “Under the circumstances, it’s the only course I can pursue in good conscience.”<sup>3</sup>

Some people’s consciences would have led them to support the prosecution of the law. His conscience was shaped not only by a desire for justice, but also by its essential twin – mercy.

What is the *origin* of his and our consciences? Is it, as some people of faith believe, implanted by God at the beginning of our lives? Is it, as some evolutionary biologists believe, something that has evolved over time not in those humans who were the fittest, but in those who cooperated with others? Is it the result of our parents’ nurturing in our early years, teaching us right from wrong? Is it an outgrowth of the values of the society in which we are raised? A definitive answer eludes us, but I suspect several, if not all, of those factors are at play.

However, what I believe is truly vital is this: our conscience is not a rigid set of moral rules that never alters. It is developed early in our existence, but it is reshaped time and again over the course of our lives by the choices we make.

The teachings of Jesus and the prophets furnish the moral guidance, but we have freedom to embrace or to reject the moral insights of our spiritual tradition. The choices we make refashion our conscience to be more or less in harmony with the justice and mercy of God.

Is this an ideal moment to canvass our conscience? If not now, then when?

#### NOTES

1. Alison Pearce Stevens, “What Part of Us Knows Right from Wrong?” March 21, 2019.
2. C. Ellis Nelson, “Don’t Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide,” (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 1.
3. Christian Cooper, “Why I Have Chosen Not to Aid the Investigation of Amy Cooper,” *The Washington Post*, July 14, 2020.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson**

God our Fortress —  
You are our refuge and strength,  
a very present help in trouble.

From age to age, you are the same;  
your love and mercy are constant,

and your faithfulness to us never wavers.  
Whether we are weighed down by sorrow,  
or lifted by joy,  
whether we are burdened by fear,  
or sustained in hope,  
you are with us in all things.  
So we come before you with grateful hearts,  
trusting that you hear our prayers.

We give thanks, O God,  
for glimpses of your grace  
in the world around us:

for the turning of the seasons,  
and the brilliant hues displayed like festival flags  
before the quiet of winter sets in;

for the abundance of harvest  
and the generosity of spirit we witness  
as gifts are shared;

for this community of faith  
and chances to connect  
in person or across devices;

for opportunities to love you  
with heart, soul and mind,  
and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

God of Grace,  
Giver of All Good Gifts —  
In this time that is set apart as sacred,  
we come to be still,  
and remember that you, alone, are God.  
We come to rest in your presence,  
to claim sabbath for our souls  
and find strength for our journeys.  
We come to offer ourselves to you,  
that you might use us for your work.

May your faithfulness to us  
inspire faithfulness to you, O God.  
Write your law upon our hearts,  
and give us gifts of wisdom and discernment,  
that we might do what is just,  
what is righteous  
in *your* sight.

As we strive to do your work in this world,  
give us the same mind that is in Christ Jesus,  
that our vision may be your vision,  
and our ways, your ways.  
And, in all we say and all we do,  
empower us to bear witness  
to your love and grace.

We ask this and all things  
in the name of your Son, our Lord,  
the one who gave us words to pray:

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**