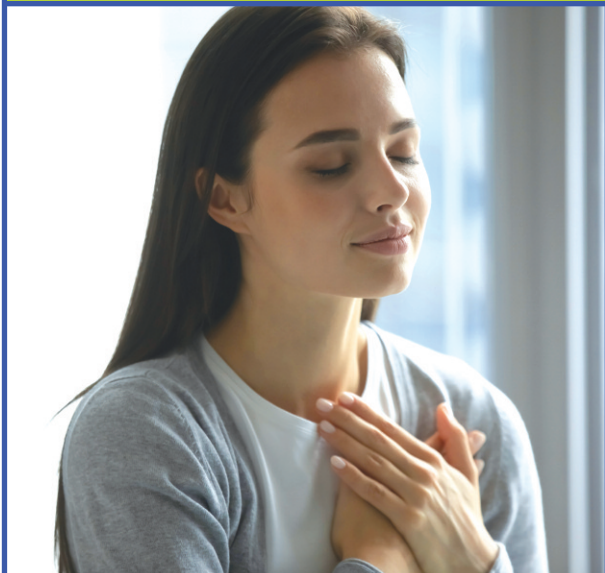


Clear Conscience, Peaceful Soul



Christopher News Notes

*“Love...comes from a pure heart,
a good conscience, and sincere faith.”*
—1 Timothy 1:5

**JESUS TAUGHT US TO LOVE GOD
AND LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS
AS WE LOVE OURSELVES.**

And as St. Paul points out in the
above quote, “a good conscience”
is key to practicing that love.

Conscience is also vital to
maintaining peace in our minds,
hearts, and souls. But doing the
right thing isn’t always easy.
So how can we best develop
a good conscience?

Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide

As children, our first exposure to the word “conscience” might have been in the classic Disney movie *Pinocchio*—specifically, in the cheerful, chirpy voice of Jiminy Cricket singing, “When you get in trouble, and you don’t know right from wrong... Take the straight and narrow path, and if you start to slide, give a little whistle! Give a little whistle! And always let your conscience be your guide.”

It’s easy to say, “Let your conscience be your guide.” But how can one possibly know what is right or wrong? First, the great Dominican scholar, St. Thomas Aquinas, believed that there is an inner knowledge that everyone possesses, whether they know Jesus Christ or not. He wrote that “the light of reason is placed by nature [and thus by God] in every man to guide him in his acts.”

Still, consciences need to be formed well because there will always be negative influences in the world. Sometimes that formation comes from parents, mentors, or a church. It can also stem from admitting and facing our own darkest sins.

In 2006, white police officer Andrew Collins of Benton Harbor, Michigan, arrested African American man Jameel McGee, believing him to be a renowned drug dealer. However, the FBI’s fingerprint check revealed McGee wasn’t a drug dealer at all.

Collins could have revealed the truth, but he was filled with a sense of his own power and feared losing credibility with the FBI. He therefore lied to them by saying McGee was the real dealer, not the original target. During a *Christopher Closeup* interview, Collins said, “I lied in front of a judge, in front of a prosecutor, and in front of a jury. Jameel was eventually convicted on my words alone.”

Collins’ corruption was soon discovered, and he faced a federal prison sentence. Only after being threatened with punishment did his conscience finally awaken. He explained, “When I got to the end of myself, the only person I had left was God. Between being caught in February and being indicted in December of 2008, is when my life started to fall under the Lordship of Christ and

when I started to seek Him out...He caused me to start to walk through repentance.

“The longer I was away from being a police officer,” Collins continued, “the more I became regretful and filled with sorrow for what I had done...God challenged me in ways that I had never been challenged before...He would show me, ‘You need to make these things right, but know that I love you.’”

Collins served time in jail, but considers it a blessing since a hunger for power and “selfish ambition” had taken over his life. He said, “I think the only way my career was going to end was being caught or being killed. I’m just happy that God allowed it to be through incarceration instead of through a box in the ground.”

When the truth about Collins was revealed, McGee was released from jail. Though initially filled with a hatred of Collins, the two eventually became friends when the former corrupt cop apologized and made amends to McGee for the grievous wrong he had committed. They shared their story in the Christopher Award-winning memoir *Convicted*.

Loving Your Annoying Neighbor

Listening to your conscience isn’t always some huge, historical event. Sometimes it’s as simple as feeling mildly uncomfortable about a situation, even if we think we’re in the right. The Holy Spirit will even prick our conscience in humorous ways.

Sarah’s elderly neighbor, Dawn, was a difficult person. She was demanding, had no sense of boundaries, and meddled in the business of others. She would often knock on Sarah’s door during all hours of the day to ask for favors, even though Sarah was busy with her own family and job. It took every ounce of Sarah’s patience to stay polite to Dawn’s face.

One weekend, Dawn’s rudeness and nagging had tried Sarah’s last nerve. Still in a bad mood, Sarah drove to Mass. The homily that day happened to be on loving our “enemies,” and Sarah heard the priest say, “Our love for God is only as deep as

A Few Questions for Examining Your Conscience

- Are you making enough time for God and prayer in your daily life?
- Are you giving your family the time, attention, and love they need?
- Do you have relationships that need to be healed?
- Is your faith reflected in good works? Have you missed opportunities to help others, especially those most in need—the weak, elderly, sick, hungry, homeless, or outcast?
- Are you a humble person who avoids envy, bitterness, lust, hatred, and negative feelings that can destroy your inner peace and do harm to others?

our love for our most annoying neighbor.” Sarah’s conscience was pricked. On her way home, she bought Dawn flowers, leaving them on her doorstep with a note. She couldn’t change Dawn, but she realized she needed to change her own attitude.

When We Stumble

Even a properly formed conscience isn’t going to keep us from ever sinning. We are, after all, imperfect humans. For that reason, the Catholic Church offers the Sacraments—in particular, the Sacrament of Reconciliation—to bring peace to our minds and hearts when we’ve stumbled. It is helpful to regularly examine our consciences, to reflect on ways that we can better ourselves or make amends to those people at whom we’ve been angry.

It can also be helpful to say an Act of Contrition Prayer, such as: “Lord Jesus, You opened the eyes of the blind, healed the sick, forgave the sinful woman, and after Peter’s denial confirmed him in Your love. Listen to my prayer: forgive all my sins, renew Your love in my heart, help me to live in perfect unity with my fellow Christians that I may proclaim Your saving power to all the world.”

A Saint Follows His Conscience

In his autobiography, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., offers this wisdom: “On some positions, Cowardice asks the question, ‘Is it safe?’ Expediency asks the question, ‘Is it politic?’ And Vanity comes along and asks the question, ‘Is it popular?’ But Conscience asks the question, ‘Is it right?’...The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of convenience, but where he stands in moments of challenge, moments of great crisis and controversy.”

There is perhaps no saint more widely recognized as a man of conscience than Sir Thomas More, the patron saint of lawyers and politicians. He was a close friend of the English King Henry VIII (of the six wives’ fame). When Henry, already married, fell in love with a courtier, he petitioned Rome for a divorce from his wife. After being refused, Henry broke with the Catholic Church and began his own, now dubbed the Church of England. He required everyone of any rank to swear an Oath of Fidelity to him, not only as king, but as head of the Church. If they refused, they were sent to prison or the gallows.

In conscience, Sir Thomas had no problem swearing allegiance to the king as head of England. But his deep Catholic faith would not allow him to acknowledge Henry VIII as head of the Church. He didn’t make a fuss or grand speeches; he just quietly refused to sign the oath.

In *A Man for All Seasons*—a play (and later a movie) written about the life of St. Thomas—playwright

Robert Bolt introduces the reader to a greedy sycophant named Richard Rich. As Sir Thomas strengthens his convictions by adhering to his conscience, Rich is seen losing his. Oliver Cromwell, a chief of state, offers Rich a bribe to present false testimony against Sir Thomas as a traitor. Bolt sums up the deterioration of Rich’s conscience when he has him say, “I’m lamenting. I’ve lost my innocence.” Cromwell responds, “You lost that some time ago. If you’ve only just noticed, it can’t have been very important to you.”

Meanwhile, Bolt has Sir Thomas say, “When statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties, they lead their country by a short route to chaos.”

Ultimately, Sir Thomas is sentenced to death by the English high court for his “betrayal.” As he is led away, he notices that Rich is wearing a pendant signifying a huge promotion to a court official of Wales—the bribe that he accepted to perjure himself. The pivotal moment of the play comes as Thomas sadly and somewhat sarcastically tells Rich, “It profits a man not to lose his soul for the whole world. But for Wales?”

By contrasting the two men, Bolt shows that the truly noble person is the one who follows his conscience, whatever the consequences. Like St. Paul, Thomas More could have said, “I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God.” May we all be able to say the same.


“It’s better to light one candle
than to curse the darkness.”

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Classic Movies about Consciences

- **Mr. Smith Goes to Washington:** Small-town kid gets appointed to Congress and shocks the cynics with his surprising spine of steel.
- **A Man for All Seasons:** The witty dialogue and perfect casting keep this movie engrossing, even though we know the ending.
- **The Scarlet and the Black:** A feisty Irish priest puts his life on the line to smuggle refugees past Nazis into the Vatican.