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*John Gill's*

**A BODY OF PRACTICAL DIVINITY**

Book 1—Chapter 23

**OF A GOOD CONSCIENCE**

The exercise of a good conscience is a branch of internal religion, and is concerned with the worship of God; God is to be "served with a pure conscience" (2 Tim. 1:3). And it has to do not only with things natural and legal, accusing or excusing, as the law of nature directs; and with things civil, with obedience to civil magistrates, to whom we are to be subject, "not only for wrath," or fear of punishment, "but also for conscience sake;" their office being of God, and an ordinance of his (Rom. 2:14,15; 13:5), but likewise with things religious, spiritual, and evangelical; things respecting both doctrine and practice; "The mystery of the faith," or the peculiar and sublime doctrines of the gospel, are to be held "in a pure conscience;" and the ministry of the word is to be exercised, "holding faith," the doctrine of faith, and a "good conscience" with it (1 Tim. 3:9; 1:19; see Heb. 13:18), yea, every good work, rightly performed, springs from hence (1 Tim. 1:5). A good conscience has God for its object, it respects his word, will, and worship; and therefore is called, "conscience towards God" (1 Pet. 2:19), as repentance is repentance towards God, and faith is faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ; or *συνειδησις θεου*, "conscience of God," which is of God, has God for its author, being implanted in the mind of man by him; it is God's vicegerent, which acts for him, and under him, and is accountable to him. I shall consider,

1. First, what conscience is, and its office.

1a. First, what it is. It is a power or faculty of the rational soul of man; by which it knows its own actions, and judges of them according to the light it has: some take it to be an habit of the mind; others an act of the practical judgment, flowing from the faculty of the understanding by the force of some certain habit.

**1a1.** It is a "science," or knowledge, as its name shows; a knowledge of the will of God, and of a man's actions, as being agreeable or disagreeable to it; it is a "common" science or knowledge, and therefore called "conscience," common with other men, and also with God; by which it knows what is true, just, and right with God, and so what is fit to be done or not done; it is that by which a man is conscious to himself of his secret thoughts, as well as of his actions; it is the spirit of a man, which only knows the things of a man within him, and knows those things which only God and himself knows.

**1a2.** From this knowledge arises a judgment which conscience forms of itself and actions, and accordingly approves or disapproves of them, and excuses or accuses for them; to which judgment the apostle refers when he says, "If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged" (1 Cor. 11:31), and this is made in the view of the judgment of God, and is submitted to that, and has that joined with it, it is a joint testimony; and even sometimes God himself appeals to the judgment of conscience, as well as conscience appeals to God; "Judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard" (Isa. 5:3; see Rom. 9:1).

**1a3.** It is the will of God revealed, which is the rule of conscience, its knowledge and judgment; either revealed by the law and light of nature, which was the rule to the Gentiles, who had not the written law (Rom. 2:14,15), or by the moral law written, which contains that good, perfect, and acceptable will of God, concerning things to be done or not done; or by the gospel, which instructs in the doctrines of grace, and enforces the duties of religion by them, and is a rule to walk by (Gal. 6:16).

**1a4.** Hence nothing can bind the conscience but the law and will of God; it is God's vicegerent, acts for and under him, and receives its authority and instructions from him, and is accountable to him, and to no other; it is a debtor to him, and owes obedience to his will; it is constrained by it, laid under a necessity to observe it, and cannot do otherwise: let men say what they will to the contrary, or be clothed with what authority they may, parents, masters, magistrates, have no power over children, servants, and subjects to oblige them to what is contrary to the dictates of conscience, according to the will of God; no laws of men are binding on conscience, which are not according to, or are contrary to the law and will of God; "We ought to obey God, rather than men," is the determination of the apostles of Christ (Acts 4:19,20; 5:29).

**1b.** Secondly, the office of conscience, what it does and ought to perform, when it does its duty.

**1b1.** It is a light to enlighten men in the knowledge of the will of God; it is that light which lightens every man that comes into the world; which is had from Christ the Creator of men; and shows unto men what is their duty to God and man; it informs them both what they are to do, and what to avoid; "The spirit of man," which is his natural conscience, is "the candle of the Lord," which he lights up in the soul of

man, "searching" the inmost recesses of the heart; especially if enlightened by the word and Spirit of God (John 1:9; Prov. 20:27).

**1b2.** It takes cognizance of a man's actions; it keeps a good lookout, and watches over them; it has a sort of an omniscience belonging to it; it sees all his goings, yea, it sees his heart, and what passes through that, marks his ways and works, and numbers his steps.

**1b3.** It takes an account of them, and registers them; it is a book in which all are written; and though it may be shut up for the present, and little looked into, there is a judgment to come, when the books will be opened, and the book of conscience among the rest; according to which men will be judged.

**1b4.** It acts the part of a witness for or against men, as even in the heathens; "Their conscience bearing witness" to their actions, good or evil; and so their thoughts excused or accused one another. So the conscience of a good man bears witness for him, and is a co-witness with the Holy Ghost, to which he can appeal, as the apostle did (Rom. 9:1), so the consciences of Joseph's brethren witnessed against them, when they said, "We are verily guilty concerning our brother" (Gen. 42:21), hence the common saying, "Conscience is as a thousand witnesses;" it is so whether as good or bad.

**1b5.** Conscience is a judge, acquitting or condemning. So the conscience of Samuel acquitted him of all charges that could be brought against him, as did God and his people also (1 Sam. 12:5). Such a clear conscience had Job; "My heart," says he, that is, my conscience, "shall not reproach," or condemn "me, so long as I live" (Job 27:6). In this sense the apostle uses the phrase, and points at the office of conscience (1 John 3:20,21).

**1b6.** In wicked men it has the office of a punisher, or tormentor; and a greater punishment, and a more severe torment cannot well be endured than the stings and lashes of a man's own conscience; this is what the scripture calls the worm that never dies; and the heathens meant by a vulture feeding on men's hearts or livers.

**2.** Secondly, the various sorts of conscience; which may be reduced to these two, an evil conscience (Heb. 10:22), and a "good conscience" (1 Tim. 1:19).

**2a.** First, an evil conscience; the consequences of which are guilt, terror, distress, and sorrow, sooner or later, unless the heart is purged from it by the blood of Christ; of which there are different sorts.

**2a1.** Which is blind and ignorant, arising from an understanding darkened and alienated from the life of God, through ignorance; when in some it comes to that pass, as to have lost the distinction between good and evil, and between darkness and light; and some do not care to come to the light, lest their deeds should be reprov'd; and others, like corrupt judges, are bribed with a gift, which blinds the

eyes of the wise; and others are so sottishly superstitious, that they think they do God service when they take away the lives of his people; and such a conscience was Saul's, when he thought he ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus, and therefore made havoc of the church.

2a2. A dull, heavy, stupid conscience, which is no more affected than a man that is asleep; and though in danger, as a man asleep in the midst of the sea, and on the top of the mast, yet careless, unconcerned, and secure; and though stricken and beaten feels it not, and is quite stupified; and like a man in a lethargy, unless a great noise is made, is not easily roused; as Pharaoh, whose conscience was alarmed with the thunder and lightnings, and then he owned he had sinned; but when these were over, he returned to his former hardness and stupidity: and even in good men conscience may be lulled asleep, and continue stupid for a considerable time; as in the case of David, till Nathan was sent to him, and charged his conscience, saying, "Thou art the man."

2a3. A partial one, when it overlooks greater sins, and is very severe on lesser ones; as Saul bore hard on the Israelites for the breach of a ceremonial law, in eating flesh with the blood, when he made no scruple of slaying fourscore and five priests of the Lord at once: and as the chief priests, who pretended it was not lawful to put the money into the treasury wherewith Christ was betrayed, because it was the price of blood, and yet it was the same money these wicked men had given to Judas to betray him: and likewise it is partial, when it suffers a man to neglect duties and services of the greatest importance, and puts him upon lesser ones; as Saul in his conscience thought he did well when he killed the lean kine, and spared the best of the flock and herd: and so the Pharisees, who omitted the weightier matters of the law, and were strict to observe the traditions of the elders, which were no part of the law.

2a4. A bribed one; as Herod's conscience was bribed with his oath, and pleaded that for the cutting off of the head of John the Baptist: and the Jews endeavoured to make their conscience easy, in pleading for the taking away the life of Christ, that they had a law, that he who made himself the Son of God should die.

2a5. An impure one, as the conscience of every unregenerate man is; "unto them that are defiled and unbelieving, is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled" (Titus 1:15), and so the conscience of a weak brother may be defiled through the imprudent use of a liberty, by a stronger one (1 Cor. 8:7).

2a6. A seared one, one cauterized, seared, as it were, with a red hot iron (1 Tim. 4:2), and so becomes insensible of sin and danger, and past feeling any remorse for sin; it is without any consciousness of it, and repentance for it (Jer. 8:6).

2a7. A desperate one, or one filled with despair; as Cain's was, when he said, "My punishment is greater than I can bear;" and Judas's, who said, "I have sinned, in that I have betrayed innocent blood!" and went and killed himself: and especially

such will be the consciences of the damned in hell, whose worm dieth not, but they will be ever in black despair.

**2b. Secondly, a good conscience.** There may be in unregenerate men, a conscience in its kind good; it may be naturally good, when it is not morally, spiritually, and evangelically good. Conscience, when it does its office according to its light, is a natural good conscience; as in the heathens, though they were guilty of sins their conscience did not charge them with; so the apostle Paul, before his conversion, "lived in all good conscience" (Acts 23:1), though a blasphemer and a persecutor. And there may be in good men a conscience not commendable, and which, in a sense, cannot be called good. As,

**2b1. There may be in them a mistaken and erring conscience;** "Some with conscience of the idol," thinking it to be something, when it is nothing, "eat it as a thing offered to an idol, and their conscience being weak is defiled" (1 Cor. 8:7).

**2b2. A doubting conscience.** The apostle Paul had no doubt, but was firmly persuaded, "that there is nothing unclean of itself;" yet observes, "that he that doubteth" whether it is unclean or not, and to be eaten or not, "is damned," that is, is condemned by himself (Rom. 14:14,23).

**2b3. A weak conscience;** which arises from weakness of faith about things lawful and pure (Rom. 14:1,14; 1 Cor. 8:7), which is soon and easily disquieted, grieved, and troubled, at seeing others do that which it doth not approve of (Rom. 14:15), and which at once judges and condemns another man's liberty (Rom. 14:3; 1 Cor. 10:29), or which, by the example of others, is easily drawn to the doing of that by which it is defiled, wounded, and destroyed, as to its peace and comfort (1 Cor. 8:7,9-12).

**2b4. A conscience smitten and wounded,** which, though not sinful, may be said to be evil, and not good, because distressed; thus David's heart, or conscience, smote him when he had numbered the people, and made him very uneasy, disquieted and uncomfortable; and sometimes it is so smitten, pricked, and wounded, and so loaded with guilt, that it is intolerable; a "wounded spirit," or conscience, "who can bear?" (Prov. 18:14).

**2b5. There is a conscience enlightened and awakened with a sense of sin and danger;** which, though for the present distressing, issues well; as in the three thousand pricked in their hearts, who said to the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" and in the jailor, who came trembling before Paul and Silas, and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" which, though attended with great agonies in both instances, issued well, in repentance unto life and salvation, not to be repented of; the immediate effects of a truly awakened conscience, are shame and confusion of face for sin; as in our first parents, who attempted to cover their nakedness, and hide themselves; see (Rom. 6:22), dread of the divine Being, fear of punishment, and wrath to come (Rom. 4:15), an ingenuous confession of sin, and sorrow for it (1 Tim.

1:13; 2 Cor. 7:10), from which shame, fear, and sorrow, it is relieved by a discovery and application of pardon through the blood of Christ, which, and which only, makes the conscience a good one. The epithets of a good conscience are,

**2b5a.** A tender one; as in Josiah, trembled under a sense of sin, affected with a godly sorrow for it, one that cannot easily comply with a temptation to commit sin; as in Joseph, who said to his mistress, tempting him, "How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" and having the fear of God before its eyes, and on its heart, cannot do what others do; as Nehemiah (2 Kings 22:19; Gen. 39:9; Neh. 5:15).

**2b5b.** A conscience void of offence; such as the apostle Paul was studiously concerned to exercise (Acts 24:16), careful not to offend, by sinning against God, and to give no offence to Jew nor Gentile, nor to the church of God; and this he studied to have "always;" not at one time only, but continually; and not in some things only, but in "all things" (Heb. 13:18).

**2b5c.** A pure conscience (1 Tim. 3:9; 2 Tim. 1:3). Conscience is defiled with sin, as all the powers and faculties of the soul are: a pure or purified conscience, is a conscience purged from the dead works of sin by the blood of Christ; an heart sprinkled from an evil conscience by the same; that is the fountain to wash in for sin and for uncleanness, that only cleanses from all sin (Heb. 9:14; 10:22), such a conscience is only a good one.

**3.** Thirdly, The effects of a good and pure conscience; which must make it very desirable and valuable.

**3a.** Freedom from the guilt of sin. This the priests under the law could not remove with their sacrifices, and so could not "make the comers to them perfect;" could not make their consciences perfect, nor ease them of the burden of sin, and purge them from the guilt of it; then they would have "had no more conscience of sins," whereas there was an annual remembrance of them, notwithstanding these sacrifices. From whence it appears, that such who have a truly purged and purified conscience, by the precious blood and better sacrifice of Christ, "have no more conscience of sins" they are purged from: not but that they make conscience, and are careful to avoid committing sin; but the guilt of sins being removed by the blood of Christ, their consciences do not condemn them for sins that have been committed by them, and from which they are purged (Heb. 10:1,2).

**3b.** Peace of soul and tranquillity of mind. The blood of Christ "speaks better things than that of Abel; the blood of Abel," in the conscience of his brother, the murderer, spoke terror, wrath, and damnation; but the blood of Christ, in the conscience of a sinner, purified by it, speaks peace, pardon, and salvation; one that is justified by faith in the blood and righteousness of Christ, has peace with God, and peace in himself; the effect of this is, "quietness and assurance for ever."

**3c. Joy, as well as peace, is another effect of a good and pure conscience; especially when atonement for sin by the sacrifice of Christ is applied and received into it (Rom. 5:11), yea, the testimony of conscience, with respect to integrity and uprightness in conversation, under the influence of divine grace, yields joy and pleasure to a good man (2 Cor. 1:12), as an evil conscience troubles and distresses, and gives sorrow; a good conscience exhilarates, and makes joyful and cheerful; the wise man says, "a merry heart," which some interpret of a good conscience, "makes a cheerful countenance, and hath a continual feast" (Prov. 15:13,15).**

**3d. Boldness, confidence, and glorying in the midst of calumnies, reproaches, and persecutions from the world, is another effect of it; a man of a good conscience can defy all his enemies, and put them on proof of making good their calumnies, and can easily refute them; as Samuel said (1 Sam. 12:3), and such a man, for "conscience towards God, can endure grief, suffering wrongfully;" not as an evil doer, but as a Christian; and therefore is not ashamed, but "glorifies God on this behalf" (1 Pet. 2:19; 4:15,16), yea, if a man's heart and conscience does not condemn him, then has he "confidence towards God" (1 John 3:21), as well as towards men.**

**3e. The effect of a good conscience, purified by the blood of Jesus, is a deliverance from the fears of death and judgment to come; such a man is not "afraid of evil tidings" now, of evil times approaching, and of judgments coming upon the earth; nor is he terrified at the alarms of death, but meets it with a composed mind, and has confidence that he shall not be ashamed before the Judge of all at his coming. And these are so many arguments why, Such a conscience is to be "held," and held fast; a good man should exercise himself to have it, and to exercise it, and himself in it, and be careful to do nothing contrary to it; but make use of all means to preserve it, by frequently communing with his own heart, by taking heed to his ways, and by having respect to all the commandments of God; and especially should deal with the blood of Christ continually for the purifying of his heart by faith in it, and for cleansing him from all sin.**