

What Will Guide Us?

John 16:5-16

June 16, 2019

An American writer, Mark Twain, once commented about God's blessing. He said, "It is by the goodness of God that in our country we have those three unspeakably precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and the prudence never to practice either of them."¹

Conscience, how do we define conscience? Socrates described it as "the wife from whom there is no divorce." Whether you become a noble or an immoral person, all depends on your conscience that directs your behaviors and actions. However, conscience is difficult to define. John Milton saw conscience as an "umpire," a judge of our behavior. Thomas Aquinas called it "the pedagogue (or the teacher) of the soul." Lord Byron called it "the oracle of God."²

I suppose that most people believe that conscience is the guide for our principles and actions. How is our conscience developed? Our conscience is mainly the result of how we are brought up.

Early in life we learn that certain things that we do bring us rewards, while other things bring us punishments. So, we develop an idea that some behaviors are acceptable and even praised while other behaviors are discouraged. That is how we develop conscience.

In other words, conscience is merely the voice of our cultural environment. If we lived in a different cultural environment, our morals and mores would be different. Conscience merely reflects the customs and prejudices of the society we live in. And these customs and prejudices change from environment to environment, and also from time to time. It can change based on human experiences. Since our conscience can change based on our experiences, it cannot be a reliable guide for our actions and behaviors.

What we need is something more stable, something more permanent and reliable to guide our thoughts, actions and behaviors. So, what could that be? What could be the supra-cultural that could guide our conscience? It is the Scripture, the holy word of God. As we read and study the word of God, the Holy

¹ <https://www.brainyquote.com/topics/conscience>

² From Donald B. Strobe's sermon, "Is Conscience the Best Guide?" www.esermons.com

Spirit forms, leads and guides our conscience. Jesus said, “When the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.”³

The problem is that people do not read or study the Scripture. Even Christians don’t. So, they rely on human experience to guide their conscience, and their conscience to guide their actions. Some may say, education is what guides our conscience, but our education is shaped and molded by the secular morality.

The challenge of every Christian believer is to live a holy life. First Peter 1:15-16 read, “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: Be holy, because I am holy.” The latter part of this verse is a direct quotation from Leviticus 11:44(b) and 45(b), in which God says, “I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy...I am the Lord who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.” In these two short verses, God repeats twice saying, “Be holy, because I am holy.” God is declaring his commandment that we must live a holy life.

God expects us to be as holy as he is. At least, our lives must be in the direction of living the holy life. Holiness is not an option for God’s people. It is a requirement.

Throughout the Bible, God states it again and again that we ought to be holy in our thoughts and actions. Paul makes it clear that we have been chosen by Christ “to be holy and blameless before Him” (Eph 1:4).

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul states that we are not only called to be holy, but the Holy Spirit makes holiness possible for us. And whoever rejects this instruction, that we ought to be and can be holy, rejects God.⁴ However, a holy life requires our obedience to God. Without obedience, holiness is not possible. That is why God gives us his Spirit to guide us and to empower us to be holy.

In Ezekiel 36:27, God promises: “I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” He says he would help us to be holy. But we have to be obedient.

³ John 16:13, In this sermon all Scriptures are quoted from New International Version

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 4:7-8

It is only when we yield ourselves to the Lord, he gives us a new heart. He alters our nature. He subdues the old nature, and breathes new life into us. This new life is what makes obedience possible.

God's grace is what begins salvation, and our obedience is what completes our salvation. While God has made provision for our holiness, he has also given us responsibility for it. This is where we see struggle and spiritual conflict within ourselves. We have deep desires to live a holy life, but we have not been obedient.

We may have struggled with particular sins and moral weaknesses for some time. We may have overcome blatant sins, yet we struggle with anger, pride, jealousy, lust, racism, and indifference for the poor and the challenged. If not lazy or slothful, we waste time. If not gluttonous, we eat too much. If not completely idolatrous, we often treat money and material security as our gods. If not blatant liars, we slip into deceitful patterns and shade the truth. If not covetous of things, we find ourselves jealous of the position or popularity of others.

We know we sin, and we come to the edge of despair: Where is the victory in Jesus?

We have emphasized the salvific grace so much that we have ignored the necessity of obedience. How many times have we heard, "Just give your sins to Jesus?" Or "Let go and let God?" Or "Stop trying and start trusting?" "What we do, our discipline, our "works," have no merit for our salvation." How often have we heard that? All these slogans have elements of truth in them. No doubt.

However, after a while, we begin to sense that we don't have total victory. We are not yet free of sin. We still commit the same sins over and over again, just like the way we did before we have committed our lives to the Lord, and we wonder why. When that happens, a careful self-examination reveals that we are not obedient.

The truth is that we can't merely give our sins to Jesus, we must give ourselves to him. When we give ourselves to Jesus, he gives his Holy Spirit to us. The Holy Spirit empowers us to be obedient, which is absolute must in holy life. Paul tells us, "If you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."⁵ Stating it another way he says, "You have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God...put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly; fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed."

⁵ Romans 8:13

(Colo. 3:3,5). I am sure Paul could have included the very sins that we may be currently struggling with.

Holiness is a joint venture. The Holy Spirit enables, but we must act.

We are as holy as we want to be, because we will surrender ourselves only as much as we want to. More we surrender to the Lord, the holier we will be.

The theme of 2019 Annual Conference was “I See a New Church.” The idea was that we needed to change or expand our views of what church is and what it could be. It is to include all people, including LGBTQI+ people into the church and into the pastoral leadership. The new church is to be completely inclusive, and it is to be led by the spirit of inclusiveness, the spirit of tolerance. Now, the question is “How do we do that when the spirit of inclusiveness or the spirit of tolerance is in conflict with the Spirit of holiness, the Spirit of God?”

The United Methodist Church recognizes its mission to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,” which is biblically based. However, before we can talk about the transformation of the world, we ourselves need to constantly experience holy transformation in our own lives.

As we continue to struggle with the issue of human sexuality, we need to be reminded that God desires holiness in all of us. He said, “Be holy as I am holy!” And the only way to move toward the holiness God desires is through obedience.