**VOLUME 10; CHAPTER 03 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**CONSCIENCE by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

TONIGHT I HAVE NO TEXT. IF ANYONE IS SUFFICIENTLY UNDER the power of tradition to feel that a text is necessary, then either of the twenty-nine verses in the New Testament in which the word "conscience" is found will serve, for conscience is my theme.

Conscience is that at which some men mock, and if we could but know the truth, while they mock they feel the power of it in their own souls. Conscience is that in deference to which some men today in England are suffering imprisonment rather than disobey the dictates for which they are prepared to die.

The power of conscience has been recognized by philosophers, poets, prophets, and all great leaders of human thought. Shakespeare expresses it in the words of Hamlet:

… the dread of something after death,

The undiscover 'd country, from whose bourne

No traveller returns, puzzles the will

And makes us rather bear those ills we have

Than fly to others that we know not of.

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;

And thus the native hue of resolution

Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought

Crabbe, in his Struggles of Conscience, has these lines:

Oh Conscience! Conscience, man's most faithful friend,

Him canst thou comfort, ease, relieve, defend;

But if he will thy friendly checks forego,

Thou art, Oh! woe for me, his deadliest foe!

Sterne, in Tristam Shandy, says:

Trust that man in nothing who has not a conscience in everything.

George Washington, in his Moral Maxims, wrote:

Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire, called conscience.

Or once again, and perhaps in the whole realm of literature nothing is found more remarkable than the words of Byron:

Yet still there whispers the small voice within,

Heard through gain's silence, and o'er glory's din;

Whatever creed be taught, or land be trod,

Man's conscience is the oracle of God.

What, then, is conscience? What is its value? What part does it play in life? How much heed ought we to pay to it? These and many other related questions are being forced upon us in this strange hour in which many things we have held as sacred are being postponed to a more convenient season. It goes without saying that in this pulpit, if we discuss the theme, it is in order that we may seek the Biblical light thereupon; and to that I may add that our discussion will be concerned with the truth itself rather than with any application thereof.

As to the Biblical light, I shall begin by making some general statements. First, the word "conscience" is not found in the Old Testament; but the literature is full of the story of the operations of conscience in the human soul. Every record of a moral heroism is the answer of man to the call of his conscience. Every manifestation of immoral anger is produced by the activity of conscience. All the sobs of the penitent, and all the songs of the forgiven, are inspired by the working of conscience.

The word is found in the New Testament. Presently we shall discuss it. For the moment let us note some general things concerning its use there. According to the New Testament, conscience "bears witness," "gives testimony," produces action, for things are done "for conscience' sake." In the New Testament conscience is described as "good," as "void of offense," as "pure," as "toward God." But conscience is also described in the New Testament as "weak," as "seared," or, more literally, branded with a hot iron; as "defiled," as "evil." Finally, the New Testament declares that conscience can be "cleansed."

There is no clear-cut definition of conscience in the Bible. Perhaps the passages which come nearest to definition are two. The first is to be found in the Old Testament: "The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord searching all the inward parts of the belly." In the New Testament the passage which always seems to me to come nearest to a definition of conscience occurs in the prologue to the Gospel of John: "The true light, ... which lighteth every man." The spirit of man has many qualities, many quantities, many capacities, many activities. Among the rest it is in itself the lamp of the Lord. A light shines in every man.

Let us, then, consider, first, conscience in itself; second, conscience as to its place and power in personality; third and finally, conscience as to its place and power in society.

Our word "conscience" is almost a transliteration of Latin word from which it is derived, *conscientia*, which means simply, knowledge with.

That definition, which is perfectly accurate, and perfectly justified, and beyond which, in some senses, we shall not be able to go, leaves us asking questions. The suggestion of the word is evidently agreement. Necessarily, the next question is, Knowledge with whom or with what? Recently, a writer on conscience said: "The original connotation of the word implies a common agreement, a social idea shared by the community." Is that so? I think not. There is absolutely nothing in the history of the word to warrant the impression that conscience means a social idea shared by the community, and there is certainly nothing in Biblical use to warrant it. Conscience is ever referred to in a peculiarly individualistic sense; it is personal, it is lonely.

Therefore we ask again, What is the suggestion of the word? If it be individual, if it be personal, if it be lonely, how can it be knowledge or conviction *with*? The answer is that the agreement suggested is agreement between a man's understanding and the fact that he understands. Certain standards are postulated, use what terms you will to describe them. Speak with the old philosophers of the reason, the idea, the essential and eternal truth; or speak in the language of religion, of the law, of ethics, of truth - conscience is the sense of the soul that apprehends those things. The knowledge is true, whether I apprehend it or not; but when I apprehend it, that is conscience.

In process of time the word has been reserved for the moral realm, so that today almost invariably we draw a distinction between conscience and consciousness. Conscience is the recognition of good and bad, the distinction between right and wrong, a distinction created, not by laws written outside the man which govern his life, but by the inherent sense of his soul in the presence of these things.

But conscience in the Biblical sense is far more than that. Normally, conscience is always a warning against the bad and an urging toward the good. Conscience is that activity of the human soul which recognizes the difference between goodness and badness, which makes the distinction quite clearly to the soul itself, and which then inevitably urges the soul toward goodness, and warns the soul from badness.

Of the actual New Testament word, our word "conscience" is in every sense so trustworthy and accurate a translation that I need simply stay to remind you what that word is, and of the slight difference, which finally is no difference at all. It means seeing with; that is co-perception. Again, we have the supposition of agreement, and it always has a moral value, and the moral value is exactly the same that to which we have been referring. So much for the words themselves as to their meaning and their use.

Now as to the fact. Conscience is an activity of the human spirit in the moral realm, and normally it is wholly beneficent. Conscience is that within the soul of man which reveals goodness as goodness, which reveals badness as badness. Conscience is that which calls things by their right name, refuses to allow any evil thing to be rebaptized by a name that robs it of its real meaning and significance. Conscience will call a lie a lie, and will not allow a man to escape by applying to it the high sounding name of hyperbole. Conscience cannot prevent a man saying the untrue thing, but it will trouble him. It cannot prevent him saying it, but it does prevent him thinking it. No liar escapes that voice. He can become so accustomed to it as to laugh at it. That is the ultimate tragedy. Nevertheless, conscience persists. It is always unveiling the truth, always unmasking a lie, forever warning the soul against the wrong of wrong and the peril of wrong. That is the terror of conscience. But it is always luring the soul toward the high and the noble and the true, always inspiring the soul to follow the light, to follow the gleam, to obey the truth. That is the hope of conscience.

Conscience is an activity inherent in man by Divine creation, and active under Divine activity. This is the Biblical teaching from first to last, in both the Old Testament, in which the word is never found, though the idea prevails; and in the New Testament, in which the word occurs, and the idea is even more powerful. God never leaves a man alone in this world. That may be challenged, I know. Well, then, if it be true, as some theologians have taught, that there is a line over which a man may pass in this world and leave hope behind; if it be true that a man can in this life, and before this probationary state ends, cross such a border line and be as hopelessly lost as though he had reached the darkling void where God is not; if that be true - I do not admit it - but if it be true, then remember that a man so abandoned of God has no conscience, he has no trouble about his sin, no pain of heart in the presence of it, no sense of the badness of badness. That agony of soul that is almost despair, when alone a man thinks of sin, is the touch of God in infinite mercy on the man's soul. That is conscience. Conscience is infinitely more, and I am inclined to say infinitely other than a moral sentinel threatening a man with damnation. It will do that also. But why? In order to turn a man back from the darkness toward which he is proceeding. The severer the voice of conscience, the more terrific its appeal; the more poignant the agony of soul, the surer the evidence of the unfathomable and unutterable love of God. The very agony of conscience is a call of love.

Therefore conscience is a capacity to create responsibility. Its warnings must be heeded, its promptings must be obeyed, or it will become weakened, it will not act with the readiness it once did; it will become seared as if branded with hot iron; be insensitive to every movement in the spiritual world; it will be defiled, until, at last, it is made utterly evil. Only as men obey conscience can they escape from the perils suggested by these words of the New Testament.

Now as to the place and power of conscience in personality. All I have already been saying is pertinent at this point. Conscience exists in every human being, and originally it is good, pure, without offense, God-governed. Take a child naturally. I mean any child: that little child born in the slum, born in the East End slum, with all its squalor and its filth, where the street is the only playground; or born in the West slum, which is all veneer and false refinement and godlessness - wherever a child is born, in that child spiritually the conscience is good, pure, without offense, God-governed.

The first exercise of conscience, of the normal conscience, is witnessing. It is that activity within the soul which is wholly personal. Yet the soul knows that, somehow, it is other than personal. Have you never sat down in the presence of some temptation, opportunity, duty, responsibility, and talked to yourself? Oh, no, I am not speaking now of that muttering aloud which is a sign of old age creeping on. I am thinking of something far profounder, of the moment when you think all by yourself, and you first say, Yes, that thing is wrong; and then you say, I do not really see that it is wrong. Then, still alone, you argue with yourself. That is conscience, it is you. Ah, but "the spirit of a man is the lamp of the Lord"; that is also God, God dealing with you. That the first activity of conscience, witnessing to the difference between good and bad, and always urging the soul toward the right, and warning the soul from the wrong. Later on, when we have disobeyed the voice, when we have not followed the gleam, when we have refused to walk in the light, when knowing the good we have chosen the bad, then conscience still witnesses within the soul, still emphasizes the difference, but now the supreme note of conscience is the condemnation of the wrong done. That is the haunting of conscience. The fame of Jesus spread over Galilee and Judaea, and there was a man on a throne who said, It is John, whom I beheaded, risen from the dead! What was the matter with that man? He was an Idumean; he was a Sadducee; he did not believe in resurrection. Ah, did he not? Conscience never let him escape from the wrong he had done, never allowed him to dodge the truth, that in a drunken debauch, to please a wanton woman, he had violated conscience. Conscience violated, wronged, battered, kept on; and when he heard that there was another voice sounding he said, It is John whom I beheaded, risen from the dead. That is a wholly beneficent activity, that is still God in the soul; and had Herod repented, Herod had been ransomed and redeemed. Conscience is always calling men back. Consequently, the first human responsibility in the matter of conscience is obedience, immediate, utter, and at all costs.

Yet there is another phase of responsibility. It is not enough that I shall obey my conscience; I must constantly seek the correction and readjustment of my conscience. Conscience may be weakened, conscience may be seared, conscience may be defiled, conscience may have become permeated and saturated with evil. Hence the necessity for the perpetual correction and readjustment of conscience. I must seek the light which comes from God Himself, in order that I may know whether the light that is in me - to use the marvelous words of Jesus - be darkness or not. Conscience may be out of gear, may lead a man astray. Who shall correct it? Not you, not I; no human being can do it; God alone is able to do it. I well remember once crossing the Atlantic without a gleam of sunshine from the first moment to the last. As we were nearing New York the captain said to me, "We have been going by dead reckoning, and we are a little out of our course. We have had no sun, and all our mathematical precision breaks down unless the sun shines." That the whole point. Suppose you come late to business, my dear young friend, and the person in charge of your work says, "You are late." You reply, "You will excuse me; I am not late, it wants a minute to nine." The sharp reply is, "Your watch is wrong." Ah, yes, you must readjust your watch by Big Ben. Is that enough? No, Big Ben must be readjusted from Greenwich. Is that enough? It is if you remember that Greenwich is governed by the sun. Your conscience may get out of gear, it may be wrong. This is a most solemn consideration that every man ought to face in this particular hour. Your conscience may be misleading you. It may need readjustment, correction. That readjustment is a solemn responsibility. Prejudice must be denied. Pride must be impossible. Persistently, with regularity, sincerity, and determination, conscience must be remitted to the Son, to the essential Light, to the Light beyond which there is no light, to the Authority beyond which there is no authority, to the God Who is good, and from Whom the spirit of man proceeds. That spirit which is His candle must be held in His light, that a man may know whether or not his conscience is leading him astray. That is the human responsibility for conscience.

And so, finally, what is the place and power of conscience in society? If all consciences were normal, that is, good, pure, without offense, God-governed, there would be no difficulty in the matter of conscience. The conscience of each would be the conscience of all, and life would be a perfect harmony; and that is what will be when God has finished His work with the race and completed His victory. But it is not so to-day. There are seared, defiled, evil consciences in the world. There are also weak consciences, and these are in the majority. Weak consciences are such as are not clear in their apprehension of good and evil; they are not quick to discern. Weak consciences are not keen of scent in the fear of the Lord; they are not quick of understanding in the fear of the Lord. Here is the cause of conflict and difficulty in the realm of conscience. Here is a man whose conscience says to him, I am bound today to enlist and fight. Here is a man who says, My understanding of the will of Jesus is that I cannot do it. Who is to judge? I declare to you that you cannot, and you have no right to do so. I declare to the man who says that his conscience forbids his fighting that he has no business to impose that conviction on the man who says that he must fight; and I declare to the man who feels the tremendous obligation of the present hour - there are multitudes of them, men whom we honor in proportion as they are true men - must respect the man who cannot share his conviction. There can be no judgment. "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged." That is a very solemn and searching word. This whole Biblical conception of conscience teaches us, first, that there must be respect for the individual conscience; and, further, that no attempt must be made to impose the law of personal conscience on other men.

However, every man who takes his stand on conscience should, at least, have the ability to give a reason for the faith that inspires him. Even though he may not be able to persuade another, even though he have no right to try to compel another to stand where he stands, surely he should be able to give a reason for the faith that is in him. During the period of stress - I do not mean this war now, I mean all life as we know it - the period of human imperfection, the period during which the temporary and imperfect expedient of government by majority is in force, during that time, minorities are to be respected. If history teaches anything, it teaches that over and over again it has been proved that the minority was right, and not the majority. I give it you as a personal conviction that in every commission that has considered a great question, from the time when the commission sat in the days of Joshua to decide whether they should obey God or not, the minority report has been the correct one, and not the majority. The majority said, There is the land, it is a great and wonderful land, but we cannot take it; there are giants and walled cities! That was the majority report. The minority said, We see the giants, and the walled cities, but we see God. I come right down from then until the very latest Royal Commission that comes to my mind, the commission on Divorce, and it is the same story of the rightness of minorities. At least, that should give us pause. It is a great thing when the multitude is right, but I am never going to be persuaded that anything is right because the multitude says it is. There must be in the heart of men who believe in this Biblical revelation a respect for minorities.

In any such consideration, however, the conclusion must be on the individual note. For every man the last stand of life is his personal conscience, that conscience being cleansed and void of offense. If taking that stand shall bring that man into the place of suffering, then let him suffer. A man who for conscience' sake suffers and whimpers, calls in question the reality of his conscience. "For this is acceptable, if for conscience toward God a man ... suffereth wrongfully." Let the man who suffers for conscience know that in all probability the whole conception of the Bible bearing witness, and all human experience bearing testimony, his suffering is winning a victory for the principle for which he suffers.

So whether this way or that way we may be doubtful at the moment as to what the path of duty is, one thing only matters - that every man shall be fully persuaded in his own mind as he stands before God. So may He Who cleanses human conscience give to us the conscience which is good and pure and void of offense, so that having done all things, we may stand.