

How does the conscience work?

BY ANDY HASTINGS

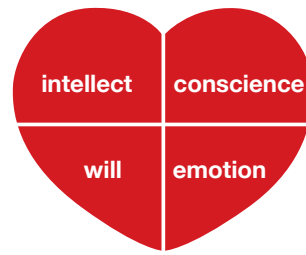
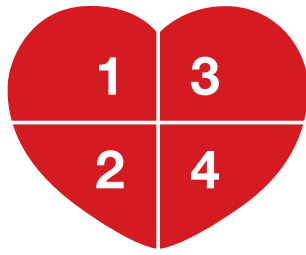
“And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them” (Matthew 13:14-15).

Acts 8:37 talks about believing with the heart. Romans 6:17 talks about obeying from the heart. Matthew 22:37 teaches we must love the Lord with all our heart. Hebrews 4:12 and Acts 8:22 mention the thoughts of the heart. It’s interesting to go through the Bible and see all of the responsibility that is given to the heart.

Many times when someone comes to an important decision in their life they say, “Should I follow my head, or should I follow my heart?” What they mean is, “Should I make a rational decision based on logic, or should I make an emotional decision based on how it will make me feel?” So, when you hear people talking about “heart-felt religion,” they’re not talking about a religion based on reason, logic and evidence. Rather, they are talking about an irrational, subjective religion based on how it makes them feel emotionally. Does the Bible endorse emotionalism and subjectivism? Many religious people would (mistakenly) say so. While the heart of man does play an important role in religion, it should not act on its own apart from logic and reason. As will be shown, the heart’s true role is not a difficult one to understand.

When Louisville Slugger makes a fine baseball bat, they don’t use the wood from the outer part of the Northern White Ash tree; they use the wood from where it is the strongest – from the center, the core, from the **heart** of the tree. Now we know that a tree doesn’t have a beating heart like we do, but it does have a core, an inner-most part. Likewise, when the Bible talks about the heart of man, it is describing the core of who we really are. Mark 12:30 says, *“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment.”*

Just like our physical heart, we also have a spiritual heart – the core of everything that makes us who we are, which will continue to exist far into eternity. Our spiritual heart, like our physical heart, is made up of four chambers: intellect, will, conscience, and emotion.



Like the physical heart, in order for the spiritual heart to work, all four chambers have to be functioning properly, and they all have to work in a specific order. Our intellect is made up of things we know. Our will determines what we do and what choices we make. If we willfully do what we think is right, then our conscience tells our emotions to feel good. However, if we willfully do what we think is wrong, our conscience tells our emotions to feel bad – a cause of much self-induced depression. Can you see why the conscience and emotion are not qualified for making important decisions by themselves? Just like our physical heart, in order for our spiritual heart to be healthy, we have to feed it properly and exercise it regularly.

How do you feed a spiritual heart? You feed the intellect. Proverbs 15:28 says, “*The heart of the righteous studies how to answer.*” In Ephesians 3:4, Paul said that when we read his letters, we can understand the knowledge he had. At the very end of 1 Thessalonians, Paul charged them to read the letter to all the brethren. Why? So their intellect would be properly fed.

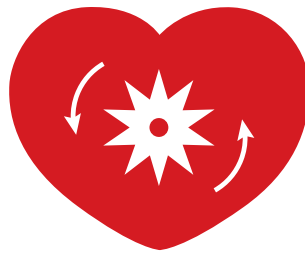
Not only does the intellect need to be properly fed, but the will also has to be exercised. James 1:22 says, “*But be doers of the word and not hearers only.*” Hebrews 12:1 says, “*Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.*” Proper exercise of the will is like a long endurance race, not a short sprint. We have to continually make good choices.

The conscience is only as good as the information stored in the intellect. Thus, our conscience can deceive us if the intellect contains false information. The terrorists who crashed the two airplanes into the Twin Towers on 9-11 probably had a clear conscience about what they were about to do before directing the aircraft into the side of those buildings occupied with thousands of people. How? Their intellect contained information based on the teachings of a false religion.

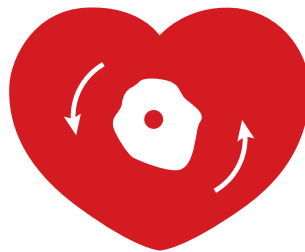
The conscience is only as good as the knowledge we have to direct it. The apostle Paul said his

conscience was clear, even after arranging the death of many Christians before he became aware of the truth, because, even though he was very wrong, he was acting upon what he thought was right. Adam and Eve were kicked out of the garden because they ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Now that that knowledge is in the world, it is up to each one of us to partake of the good knowledge. However, just knowing the truth doesn't guarantee we will make the right choices. We can know everything there is to know about right and wrong and still betray our conscience.

Some Native American Indians used to have a saying that within the heart of every man there was a hard, prickly rock that spun very fast in the center. Every time a person would betray their conscience, that rock would sling hard to one side and prick the heart, causing them to feel bad about what they had done.



If that person continued to betray their conscience by doing what they thought was wrong, each time the rock would prick, as a defense mechanism, the heart would harden just a little more, and the spikes would dull just a little more, until finally the heart would be completely hardened, and the rock soft and dull. Once we start down the road of betraying our conscience, it will lead us to a place where we could know the right thing to do, but no longer care to do it.



We need to be careful to never allow ourselves to end up like this. It is pretty scary to realize that if some angels can give up their place in Heaven (Jude 1:6), it is a possibility that even those who have obeyed the gospel can give up their promise of Heaven, too. 1 Timothy 4:1-2 talks about those

who once knew the truth, but their conscience became seared. In Acts 2:37, those Jews on the day of Pentecost were “*pricked in their heart.*” They felt bad about what they had done, and they asked, “*What shall we do?*” (Acts 2:37). They were not yet past the point of no return. In Matthew 15:8, Jesus described a people that “*worshiped God with their mouth, but their heart was far from Him.*”

Matthew 6:21 says, “*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” What is your spiritual heart condition?