

# Living the **Good** Life

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## Session 4: In Good Conscience

### Opening Prayer

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God of justice and mercy,

We live in a complicated world,  
faced with constant decisions  
and many voices telling us what is right.

Help us to hear and understand your wisdom,  
so we will be ready to face these challenges  
and always act in your love.

We pray this in Jesus name,  
Amen.

### Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide

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*Read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each participant read one paragraph at a time to the whole group, continuing around the circle.*

- Life is messy. The decisions we're faced with are rarely clean-cut moral questions that can be looked up in the Bible or a catechism. Life is full of trade-offs and gray areas. That's why we need a conscience to guide our decisions to live the *Good Life* in our specific time and situation.
- The church teaches that our conscience is the ultimate moral authority, and that we must follow it above all else. St. Thomas Aquinas said it was better to be excommunicated from the church than to ignore one's conscience, and that was really saying something in the thirteenth century when his whole society revolved around the church.
- Unfortunately, living by our conscience is not quite as easy as it sounds. What exactly does it mean to follow our conscience? How does it work?
- Our conscience is just one of many "voices" inside our heads telling us what to do, so one challenge is to distinguish it from the others. In addition, our consciences have to be "formed" in order for them to be helpful. We have some work to do before we can be confident in following that inner voice.

# One Voice among Many

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- Psychologists who follow Sigmund Freud’s model point to three aspects of human personality that influence our decision-making process.
- The first is the *id*, an impulsive influence that only cares about meeting our needs and wants as soon as possible. The id is completely selfish and not aware of consequences. When we are babies, the id is completely in control.
- The *ego* develops next to offer a reality check. It understands that acting selfishly is not always good for us in the long run, so it guides us more strategically to avoid consequences. For example, even when we’re very hungry, the ego would make us wait in line and pay for our lunch rather than stealing it (as the id would). It asks questions such as “what is legal?” and “what can I get away with?” The ego is still basically selfish, but much more polite about it.
- The third aspect, the *superego*, is often confused with our conscience. It adds another check on our actions based on what we “should” or “have to” do, driven largely by guilt. The superego is first developed in early childhood when we are seeking out approval and avoiding punishment. We internalize this external voice of authority that tells us what we should do.
- You may be familiar with some of its greatest hits: “Don’t run with scissors!” “Don’t talk with your mouth full!” “Look both ways before crossing the street!” “Don’t talk to strangers!” and “You’ll poke your eye out!”
- These messages are built up from a variety of sources: parents, schools, peers, news media, music, films, advertising, and now online and social media. The messages we learned while growing up continue to play in our heads, and they are not all appropriate, healthy, or consistent.
- When we listen to the superego, it’s because we care about what others think (even if we don’t realize it). We are motivated by fear and focused on ourselves. Strangely, we can feel overly guilty when we disobey this voice.
- Our conscience is something entirely different. It was made to respond to God’s love and generously love others. It holds us to our own values, and is focused on serving others.
- Since God already loves us fully (and won’t stop, no matter what), our conscience does not need to seek approval, affirmation, or love. At its best, it simply loves.
- These various voices battle it out in our heads as we make decisions. This is why it is so important for us to have a formed conscience that is strong and can take the lead.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① What unhealthy or unhelpful messages from your past about what you “should” do or how you “should” be still regularly play back in your head?
- ② Share about a time when you were aware of different “voices”/motivations trying to influence your decision-making.
- ③ In times when you have made bad decisions in the past, which “voice” tends to lead you astray?
- ④ Which of the mentioned voices would you most associate with personal freedom? In what way?

## Forming Our Consciences

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- Your conscience needs to be trained and shaped in order to do its job. When we talk about building character or focusing on the person we are *becoming*, we are talking about forming a conscience.
- Consciences are social. I can't form my conscience solely from my own limited experience and perspective. I also need to draw on the wisdom of others. As Catholics, we recognize that much of that wisdom comes to us from God through the church.
- Moral laws are one form that wisdom takes, expressing an ideal to strive for. Jesus upheld the importance of the Law, but was clear that it should not always be slavishly followed. He pointed especially to the principles *behind* the Law.
- But Jesus went much further, saying that having a "clean record" is not the point. He called us to be proactive, putting love into action in imaginative ways. So beyond the "thou shalt nots" of his time, he gave us many "thou shalt" principles and practices for loving without boundaries (e.g. the Beatitudes). Embracing these teachings also forms our conscience.
- The reason these principles are so important is that they provide an objective stake in the ground as to what is right, loving, and just. This counters our temptation to rationalize that an action is right for other selfish reasons.
- The Bible offers us laws and principles, but it also offers rich stories and parables that can take us even further in understanding what God asks of us and what loving action looks like in messy, concrete situations.
- As Christians, we particularly focus on what kind of person we need to become to follow Jesus faithfully. The disciples certainly weren't perfect (from Peter's denials to Thomas' doubts), but they learned from their mistakes and strengthened each other in their commitment to follow the Way.
- Another source of wisdom is our church tradition and teaching, which brings Jesus' message into the modern day. The church offers us a very important starting point to understand how we should respond to challenges and circumstances that didn't exist in biblical times. For example, Catholic social teaching offer powerful insights on how we should treat each other in society.
- Note that appealing to our conscience should not be an excuse to ignore church teaching and do whatever we feel like. We have a responsibility to understand, consider, and weigh the church's position before deciding against it.
- But our faith is not the only source of principles we internalize in our conscience. We are strongly influenced by our culture, society, and peers. These are not necessarily bad influences, but are definitely distinct from the Gospel.
- For example, patriotism, nationalism, and militarism are not Christian values. God expects our loyalty above all else. And God doesn't love one country more than any other country, since everyone is a child of God. "Love of country" is not bad, but which values win when they come in competition?
- Fully forming a conscience means learning what our faith teaches and the principles it embraces so we can embrace them as our own.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① What are some specific ways that your conscience helps you overcome selfishness? What principles help you get on the right track?
- ② How have you experienced conflicts between values from your faith and the values of society?
- ③ What can you do to root your decision making more in love and serving others?

# The Spirit of the Law

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*Read aloud the Gospel verses **John 14:15-17** and **25-27** from a Bible, then continue with the following talking points.*

- Your conscience is a gift from God and the Holy Spirit can speak to you through your conscience. Our job is to prepare our hearts so we can listen.
- In another biblical image found both in Romans 2:15 and Hebrews 10:16-17, we hear that God has written the law on our hearts. We all have an in-born knowledge of God and what it means to live in love.
- God has not left us on our own, but continues to speak to us and guide us as we pursue the *Good Life*.

## Reflection Questions

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- ① What is your reaction to hearing these two biblical references? Is it easy or difficult to think of God actively helping in our decision making?
- ② Have you ever prayed over an important decision and/or tried to listen to God speaking through your heart? What happened? If not, what would keep you from doing so in the future?

## Closing Prayer

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Mysterious God,

Thank you for the gift of your Spirit,  
who continues to guide us today.

Help us take our responsibility seriously  
to form our consciences

so we can hear your  
Word and Law more clearly.

Give us the strength and wisdom  
to always act out of love,  
through the example of your Son.

We pray this in name of the Father,  
the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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