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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 12

The Witness of Our Own Spirit

"This is our rejoicing, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world." (2 Cor. 1:12.)

1. Such is the voice of every true believer in Christ, so long as he abides in faith and love. "He that followeth me," saith our Lord, "walketh not in darkness:" And while he hath the light, he rejoiceth therein. As he hath "received the Lord Jesus Christ," so he walketh in him; and while he walketh in him, the exhortation of the Apostle takes place in his soul, day by day, "Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, Rejoice."

2. But that we may not build our house upon the sand, (lest when the rains descend, and the winds blow, and the floods arise and beat up it, it fall and great be the fall thereof,) I intend in the following discourse to show, what is the nature and ground of a Christian's joy. We know, in general, it is that happy peace, that calm satisfaction of spirit, which arises from such a testimony of his conscience, as is here described by the Apostle. But, in order to understand this the more thoroughly, it will be requisite to weigh all his words; whence will easily appear, both what we are to understand by conscience, and what by the testimony thereof; and also, how he that hath this testimony rejoiceth evermore.

3. And, First, what are we to understand by conscience? What is the meaning of this word that is in every one's mouth? One would imagine it was an exceedingly difficult thing to discover this, when we consider how large and numerous volumes have been from time to time wrote on this subject; and how all the treasures of ancient and modern learning have been ransacked, in order to explain it. And yet it is to be feared, it has not received much light from all those elaborate inquiries. Rather, have not most of those writers puzzled the cause; "darkening counsel by words without knowledge;" perplexing a subject, plain in itself, and easy to be understood. For, set aside but hard words, and every man of an honest heart will soon understand the thing.

4. God has made us thinking beings, capable of perceiving what is present, and of reflecting or looking back on what is past. In particular, we are capable of perceiving whatsoever passes in our own hearts or lives; of knowing whatsoever we feel or do; and that either while it passes, or when it is past. This we mean when we say, man is a conscious being: He hath a consciousness, or inward perception, both of things present and past, relating to himself, of his own tempers and outward behavior. But what we usually term conscience, implies somewhat more than this. It is not barely the knowledge of our present or the remembrance of our preceding life. To remember, to bear witness either of past or present things, is only one, and the least office of conscience: Its main business is to excuse or accuse, to approve or disapprove, to acquit or condemn.

5. Some latter writers indeed have given a new name to this, and have chose to style it a moral sense. But the old word seems preferable to the new, were it only on this account, that it is more common and familiar among men, and therefore easier to be understood. And to Christians it is undeniably preferable, on another account also; namely, because it is scriptural; because it is the word which the wisdom of God hath chose to use in the inspired writings.

And according to the meaning wherein it is generally used there, particularly in the Epistles of St. Paul, we may understand by conscience, a faculty or power, implanted by God in every soul that

comes into the world, of perceiving what is right or wrong in his own heart or life, in his tempers, thoughts, words, and actions.

6. But what is the rule whereby men are to judge of right and wrong Whereby their conscience is to be directed The rule of Heathens, as the Apostle teaches elsewhere is "the law written in their hearts;" by the finger of God; "their conscience also bearing witness," whether they walk by this rule or not, "and their thoughts the mean while accusing, or even excusing," acquitting, defending them; h kai apologoumenvn. (Rom. 2:14, 15.) But the Christian rule of right and wrong is the word of God, the writings of the Old and New Testament; all that the Prophets and "holy men of old" wrote "as they were moved by the Holy Ghost;" all that Scripture which was given by inspiration of God, and which is indeed profitable for doctrine, or teaching the whole will of God; for reproof of what is contrary thereto; for correction or error; and for instruction, or training us up, in righteousness. (2 Tim. 3:16.)

This is a lantern unto a Christian's feet, and a light in all his paths. This alone he receives as his rule of right or wrong, of whatever is really good or evil. He esteems nothing good, but what is here enjoined, either directly or by plain consequence, he accounts nothing evil but what is here forbidden, either in terms, or by undeniable inference. Whatever the Scripture neither forbids nor enjoins, either directly or by plain consequence, he believes to be of an indifferent nature; to be in itself neither good nor evil; this being the whole and sole outward rule whereby his conscience is to be directed in all things.

7. And if it be directed thereby, in fact, then hath he "the answer of a good conscience toward God." "A good conscience is what is elsewhere termed by the Apostle, "a conscience void of offense." So, what he at one time expresses thus, "I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day;" (Acts 23:1;) he denotes at another, by that expression, "Herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offense toward God, and toward men." (Acts 24:16.) Now in order to this there is absolutely required, First, a right understanding of the word of God, or his "holy, and acceptable, and perfect will" concerning us, as it is revealed therein. For it is impossible we should walk by a rule, if we do not know what it means. There is, Secondly, required (which how few have attained!) a true knowledge of ourselves; a knowledge both of our hearts and lives, or our inward tempers and outward conversation: Seeing, if we know them not, it is not possible that we should compare them with our rule. There is required, Thirdly, an agreement of our hearts and lives, or our tempers and conversation, or our thoughts, and words, and works, with that rule, with the written word of God. For, without this, if we have any conscience at all, it can be only an evil conscience. There is, Fourthly, required, an inward perception of this agreement with our rule: And this habitual perception, this inward consciousness itself, is properly a good conscience; or, in other phrase of the Apostle, "a conscience void of offense, toward God, and toward men."

8. But whoever desires to have a conscience thus void of offence, let him see that he lay the right foundation. Let him remember, "other foundation" of this "can no man lay, than that which is laid, even Jesus Christ." And let him also be mindful, that no man buildeth on him but by a living faith; that no man is a partaker of Christ, until he can clearly testify, "The life which I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God;" in him who is now revealed in my heart; who "loved me, and gave himself for me." Faith alone is that evidence, that conviction, that demonstration of things invisible, whereby the eyes of our understanding being opened, and divine light poured in upon them, we "see the wondrous things of God's law;" the excellency and purity of it; the height, and depth, and length, and breadth thereof, and of every commandment contained therein. It is by faith that, beholding "the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ," we perceive, as in a glass, all that is in ourselves, yea, the inmost

motions of our souls. And by this alone can that blessed love of God be "shed abroad in our hearts," which enables us so to love one another as Christ loved us. By this is that gracious promise fulfilled unto all the Israel of God, "I will put my laws into their mind, and write" (or engrave) "them in their hearts;" (Heb. 8:10;) hereby producing in their souls an entire agreement with his holy and perfect law, and "bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."

And, as an evil tree cannot bring forth good fruit, so a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit. As the heart therefore of a believer, so likewise his life, is thoroughly conformed to the rule of God's commandments; in a consciousness whereof, he can give glory to God, and say with the Apostle, "This is our rejoicing, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world."

9. "We have had our conversation:" The Apostle in the original expresses this by one single word, *anestrajhmen*, but the meaning thereof is exceeding broad, taking in our whole deportment, yea, every inward as well as outward circumstance, whether relating to our soul or body. It includes every motion of our heart, of our tongue, or our hands, and bodily members. It extends to all our actions and words; to the employment of all our powers and faculties; to the manner of using every talent we have received, with respect either to God or man.

10. "We have had our conversation in the world;" even in the world of the ungodly: Not only among the children of God; (that were comparatively a little thing;) but among the children of the devil, among those that lie in wickedness, *en tv ponhry*, in the wicked one. What a world is this! How thoroughly impregnated with the spirit it continually breathes. As our God is good, and doeth good, so the god of this world and all his children, are evil, and do evil (so far as they are suffered) to all the children of God. Like their father, they are always lying in wait, or "walking about, seeking whom they may devour;" using fraud or force, secret wiles or open violence, to destroy those who are not of the world; continually warring against our souls, and, by old or new weapons, and devices of every kind, labouring to bring them back into the snare of the devil, into the broad road that leadeth to destruction.

11. "We have had our" whole "conversation," in such a world, "in simplicity and godly sincerity." First, in simplicity: This is what our Lord recommends, under the name of a "single eye." "The light of the body," saith he, "is the eye. If therefore thine eye be single, the whole body shall be full of light." The meaning whereof is this: What the eye is to the body, that the intention is to all the words and actions: If therefore this eye of thy soul be single, all thy actions and conversation shall be "full of light," of the light of heaven, of love, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.

We are then simple of heart, when the eye of our mind is singly fixed on God; when in all things we aim at God alone, as our God, our portion, our strength, our happiness, our exceeding great reward, our all, in time and eternity. This is simplicity; when a steady view, a single intention of promoting his glory, of doing and suffering his blessed will, runs through our whole soul, fills all our heart, and is the constant spring of all our thoughts, desires, and purposes.

12. "We have had our conversation in the world," Secondly, "in godly sincerity." the difference between simplicity and sincerity seems to be chiefly this: Simplicity regards the intention itself, sincerity the execution of it; and this sincerity relates not barely to our words, but to our whole conversation, as described above. It is not here to be understood in that narrow sense, wherein St. Paul himself sometimes uses it, for speaking the truth, or abstaining from guile, from craft, and

dissimulation; but in a more extensive meaning, as actually hitting the mark, which we aim at by simplicity. Accordingly, it implies in this place, that we do, in fact, speak and do all to the glory of God; that all our words are not only pointed at this, but actually conducive thereto; that all our actions flow on in an even stream, uniformly subservient to this great end; and that, in our whole lives, we are moving straight toward God, and that continually; walking steadily on in the highway of holiness, in the paths of justice, mercy, and truth.

13. This sincerity is termed by the Apostle, godly sincerity, or the sincerity of God; *eilikrineia* Qeou, to prevent our mistaking or confounding it with the sincerity of the Heathens; (for they had also a kind of sincerity among them, for which they professed no small veneration;) likewise to denote the object and end of this, as of every Christian virtue, seeing whatever does not ultimately tend to God, sinks among "the beggarly elements of the world." By styling it the sincerity of God, he also points out the Author or it, the "Father of lights, from whom every good and perfect gift descendeth;" which is still more clearly declared in the following words, "Not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God."

14. "Not with fleshly wisdom:" As if he had said, "We cannot thus converse in the world, by any natural strength of understanding, neither by any naturally acquired knowledge or wisdom. We cannot gain this simplicity, or practise this sincerity, by the force either of good sense, good nature, or good breeding. It overshoots all our native courage and resolution, as well as all our precepts of philosophy. The power of custom is not able to train us up to this, nor the most exquisite rules of human education. Neither could I Paul ever attain hereto, notwithstanding all the advantages I enjoyed, so long as I was in the flesh, in my natural state, and pursued it only by fleshly, natural wisdom."

And yet surely, if any man could, Paul himself might have attained thereto by that wisdom: For we can hardly conceive any who was more highly favoured with all the gifts both of nature and education. Besides his natural abilities, probably not inferior to those of any person then up the earth, he had all the benefits of learning, studying at the University of Tarsus, afterwards brought up at the feet of Gamaliel, a person of the greatest account, both for knowledge and integrity, that was then in the whole Jewish nation. And he had all the possible advantages of religious education, being a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee, trained up in the very strictest sect or profession, distinguished from all others by a more eminent strictness. And herein he had "profited above many" others, "who were his equals" in years, "being more abundantly zealous" of whatever he thought would please God, and "as touching the righteousness of the law, blameless." But it could not be, that he should hereby attain this simplicity and godly sincerity. It was all but lost labour; in a deep, piercing sense of which he was at length constrained to cry out, "The things which were gain to me, those I counted loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord." (Phil. 3:7, 8.)

15. It could not be that ever he should attain to this but by the "excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ" our Lord; or, "by the grace of God," -- another expression of nearly the same import. By "the grace of God" is sometimes to be understood that free love, that unmerited mercy, by which I a sinner, through the merits of Christ, am now reconciled to God. But in this place it rather means that power of God the Holy Ghost, which "worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure." As soon as ever the grace of God in the former sense, his pardoning love, is manifested to our souls, the grace of God in the latter sense, the power of his Spirit, takes place therein. And now we can perform, through God, what to man was impossible. Now we can order our conversation aright. We can do all things in the light and power of that love, through Christ which strengtheneth us. We now have "the testimony of our conscience," which we could never have by fleshly wisdom, "that in simplicity and godly

sincerity, we have our conversation in the world."

16. This is properly the ground of a Christian's joy. We may now therefore readily conceive, how he that hath this testimony in himself rejoiceth evermore. "My soul," may he say, "doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit rejoiceth in God my Saviour." I rejoice in him, who, of his own unmerited love, of his own free and tender mercy, "hath called me into this state of salvation," wherein, through his power, I now stand. I rejoice, because his spirit beareth witness to my spirit, that I am bought with the blood of the Lamb; and that, believing in him, "I am a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven." I rejoice, because the sense of God's love to me hath, by the same Spirit, wrought in me to love him, and to love for his sake every child of man, every soul that hath made. I rejoice, because he gives me to feel in myself "the mind that was in Christ:" -- Simplicity, a single eye to him, in every motion of my heart; power always to fix the loving eye of my soul on Him who "loved me, and gave himself for me;" to aim at him alone, at his glorious will, in all I think, or speak, or do: -- Purity, desiring nothing more but God; "crucifying the flesh with its affections and lusts;" "setting my affections on things above, not on things of the earth:" -- Holiness, a recovery of the image of God, a renewal of soul "after his likeness:" -- And Godly Sincerity, directing all my words and works, so as to conduce to his glory. In this I likewise rejoice, yea, and will rejoice, because my conscience beareth me witness in the Holy Ghost, by the light he continually pours in upon it, that "walk worthy of the vocation wherewith I am called;" that I "abstain from all appearance of evil," fleeing from sin as from the face of a serpent; that as I have opportunity I do all possible good, in every kind, to all men; that I follow my Lord in all my steps, and do what is acceptable in his sight. I rejoice, because I both see and feel, through the inspiration of God's Holy Spirit, that all my works are wrought in him, yea, and that it is He who worketh all my works in me. I rejoice in seeing through the light of God, which shines in my heart, that I have power to walk in his ways; and that, through his grace, I turn not therefrom, to the right hand or to the left.

17. Such is the ground and the nature of that joy whereby an adult Christian rejoiceth evermore. And from all this we may easily infer, First, that this is not a natural joy. It does not arise from any natural cause: Not from any sudden flow of spirits. This may give a transient start of joy; but the Christian rejoiceth always. It cannot be owing to bodily health or ease; to strength and soundness of constitution: For it is equally strong in sickness and pain; yea, perhaps far stronger than before. Many Christians have never experienced any joy, to be compared with that which then filled their soul, when the body was well nigh worn out with pain, or consumed away with pining sickness. Least of all can it be ascribed to outward prosperity, to the favour of men, or plenty of worldly goods; for then, chiefly, when their faith has been tried as with fire, by all manner of outward afflictions, have the children of God rejoiced in Him, whom unseen they loved, even with joy unspeakable. And never surely did men rejoice like those who were used as "the filth and off scouring of the world;" who wandered to and fro, being in want of all things; in hunger, in cold, in nakedness; who had trials, not only of "cruel mockings," but, "moreover of bonds and imprisonments;" yea, who, at last, "counted not their lives dear unto themselves, so they might finish their course with joy."

18. From the preceding considerations, we may Secondly, infer, that the joy of a Christian does not arise from any blindness of conscience, from his not being able to discern good from evil. So far from it, that he was an utter stranger to this joy, till the eyes of his understanding were opened; that he knew it not, until he had spiritual senses, fitted to discern spiritual good and evil. And now the eye of his soul waxeth not dim: He was never so sharp-sighted before: He has so quick a perception of the smallest things, as is quite amazing to the natural man. As a mote is visible in the sun-beam, so to him

who is walking in the light, in the beams of the uncreated Sun, every mote of sin is visible. Nor does he close the eyes of his conscience any more: That sleep is departed from him. His soul is always broad awake: No more slumber or folding of the hands to rest! He is always standing on the tower, and hearkening what his lord will say concerning him; and always rejoicing in this very thing, in "seeing him that is invisible."

19. Neither does the joy of a Christian arise, Thirdly, from any dulness or callousness of conscience. A kind of joy, it is true, may arise from this, in those whose "foolish hearts are darkened;" whose heart is callous, unfeeling, dull of sense, and, consequently, without spiritual understanding. Because of their senseless, unfeeling hearts, they may rejoice even in committing sin; and this they may probably call liberty! -- which is indeed mere drunkenness of soul, a fatal numbness of spirit, the stupid insensibility of a sacred conscience. On the contrary, a Christian has the most exquisite sensibility; such as he could not have conceived before. He never had such a tenderness of conscience as he has had, since the love of God has reigned in his heart. And this also is his glory and joy, that God hath heard his daily prayer: --

O that my tender soul might fly The first abhorr'd approach of ill; Quick, as the apple of an eye,

The slightest touch of sin to feel. 20. To conclude. Christian joy is joy in obedience; joy in loving God and keeping his commandments: And yet not in keeping them, as if we were thereby to fulfil the terms of the covenant of works; as if by any works or righteousness of ours, we were to procure pardon and acceptance with God. Not so: We are already pardoned and accepted through the mercy of God in Christ Jesus. Not as if we were by our own obedience to procure life, life from the death of sin: This also we have already through the grace of God. Us "hath he quickened, who were dead in sins;" and now we are "alive to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord." But we rejoice in walking according to the covenant of grace, in holy love and happy obedience. We rejoice in knowing that, "being justified through his grace," we have "not received that grace of God in vain: "that God having freely (not for the sake of our willing or running, but through the blood of the Lamb) reconciled us to himself, we run, in the strength which he hath given us, the way of his commandments. He hath "girded us with strength unto the war," and we gladly "fight the good fight of faith." We rejoice through him who liveth in our hearts by faith, to "lay hold of eternal life." This is our rejoicing, that as our "Father worketh hitherto," so (not by our own might or wisdom, but through the power of his Spirit, freely given in Christ Jesus) we also work the works of God. And may he work in us whatsoever is well-pleasing in his sight! To whom be the praise for ever and ever! [It may easily be observed, that the preceding discourse describes the experience of those that are strong in faith: But hereby those that are weak in faith may be discouraged; to prevent which, the following discourse may be of use.] Edited by Jerald Forster with corrections by Ryan Danker and George Lyons for the Wesley Center for Applied Theology.

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-

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 - [John Wesley the Methodist](#)
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 - [A Christian Library](#)
 - [An Address to the Clergy](#)
- [Charles Wesley](#)
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Table of Contents

[Español](#)

[What is Wesleyanism?](#)

[John Wesley](#)

[The Journal of John Wesley](#)

[The Life of John Wesley by John Telford](#)

[A Compendium of Natural Philosophy](#)

[The New Testament - John Wesley's Translation](#)

[Translating Wesley's Writings into Late 20th-Century American General English](#)

[The Sermons of John Wesley \(1872 Edition\)](#)

[A Plain Account of Christian Perfection](#)

[John Wesley's Notes on the Bible](#)

[John Wesley the Methodist](#)

[The Letters of John Wesley](#)

[John Wesley - Evangelist](#)

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[An Address to the Clergy](#)

[Charles Wesley](#)

[Arminianism](#)

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