

# Journey of Faith



## In Short:

- Morality is ultimately ordered by Christ.
- We are called to reflect on personal choices.
- We are called to form our conscience.



*"Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, sounds in his heart at the right moment."*

CCC 1776

## Christian Moral Living

Evan was very close to getting his first "A" in math, a subject he had always found difficult. Two days before his final exam, he saw a copy of the test sitting on his teacher's desk while she was out of the room. Evan was tempted to look at the first few answers so he could go into the test with confidence, even though he knew that was still cheating. But if he knew a few questions in advance, he would have a much better chance of getting that "A"....Evan was torn.

When Carrie joined her friends near the lockers before school, she heard them saying cruel things about a girl who was new to the class. At first, Carrie just listened to their comments, but soon she was joining the conversation, too. It made her feel like she was part of the group. But she also knew these stories about the new girl weren't true. Carrie started feeling guilty. She wanted to be part of the group and if she said something or stopped hanging out they might start talking about her. But how would the new girl feel if she ever found out about the lies her classmates were spreading?

- What would you do if you were Evan or Carrie?
- What would you tell a friend in a similar situation?



We are faced with moral decisions every day. These decisions, or our choice to not do anything, develop our moral character. Who you are is defined by the decisions you make or don't make when you're asked to choose between right and wrong, between standing up or bowing out. Jesus tells us how important our actions are:

*"Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. But it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock. And everyone who listens to these words of mine but does not act on them will be like a fool who built his house on sand. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. And it collapsed and was completely ruined."*

Matthew 7:24-27

Building your moral house on rock when you're young gives you a strong foundation as you move into adult life. When you choose the right and honest thing consistently, it becomes a habit, and that makes it easier for you to choose the right thing the next time you're faced with a similar option. When we form the habit of choosing honesty, truth, and love, those actions become the ones we default to when facing a problem.

If we fall into the habit of lying, cheating, or deceiving others to get what we want, we are building our houses on sand.

*"The education of the conscience is a lifelong task....The education of the conscience guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart."*

CCC 1784

This is where faith can get difficult. Believing in Jesus and understanding the faith are easy in comparison to actually living like Christ. As small children, it's easy to know right from wrong. But when you're faced with more complex moral issues, what's right or wrong may not be as clear, or we know what's right but struggle to follow through with those actions. Plus, the pressure we can feel from the world or friends or family members to make certain decisions makes the task of choosing right or wrong even more difficult.

Because God loves us, we have a free will. Having a **free will** means we have the freedom and power to make choices, to act or not act, to choose how we respond. God won't step in and stop us from making a wrong choice. We have to do our best to discern (make a well-informed decision) what's right and what's wrong; what's the will of God and what's selfish desire.

- How do you make difficult choices?
- Do you ever avoid making choices because you aren't sure what's right or wrong?



## Our Conscience

*"A well-formed conscience is upright and truthful. It formulates its judgments according to reason, in conformity with the true good willed by the wisdom of the Creator."*

CCC 1783

We might have an image of conscience being a little angel and a little devil hovering over each shoulder while telling us what to do or not do. But our conscience is actually a part of who we are. **Conscience** is what enables us to "recognize the moral quality of a concrete act" that we're thinking about doing, in the process of doing, or have already done (CCC 1778). Conscience gives us feelings of peace when we make moral decisions or unrest when we make poor moral choices.

- Write about a time when you felt contentment and joy because you did the right thing.
- Write about a time when you felt uneasy or anxious because you did the wrong thing.



It's important to get into the habit of listening to our conscience, and to be sensitive to how we feel after we have made a difficult choice. Our conscience is subtle. It softly urges us to act as God would want us to act. When we are aware of our consciences and act on what it tells us, we are building that firm foundation written about in Matthew's Gospel.

Unfortunately, we can also get into the habit of ignoring our consciences. We can also miss the quiet voice of our consciences if we don't take time to be quiet and listen. When we're constantly surrounded by the noise of the world, we can miss the gentle voice of conscience inside us. This is where a strong prayer life can help us stay on the right path. Without the quiet and solitude necessary for prayerful reflection and clear thinking, it can be very difficult to discern right from wrong when we are faced with moral decisions.

- What are some ways you can step back from the world and get in touch with your conscience?



## Conscience and the Bible

*"In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path; we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord's Cross."*

CCC 1785

Once we decide to take the time (or make the time) to come to know God's will, we can begin our search with sacred Scripture. Jesus promises us, "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him" (John 14:23). These are wonderfully reassuring words. They tell us that if we make Jesus the center of our lives and use his words and actions as our guide, we will know the best way to live. We will not be perfect. We'll fail sometimes and make bad choices, but Jesus won't give up on us. He dwells within us and will work to bring us back on track.

The moral teaching of Jesus includes understanding and obeying the **commandments** of the Old Testament. The Ten Commandments were accepted by the Jews in Jesus' time as God's will. They were given to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20:1–21; Deuteronomy 5:1–21). They have remained the standards of morality for generations.

After the Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt, God gave them the commandments to keep them from falling into a worse form of slavery—slavery to sin. When we lie, steal, or take another's life, we can't be truly free. We can't experience full human joy. The great value of the commandments can be seen if we ask ourselves the simple question, "What would the world be like tomorrow if everyone kept the Ten Commandments?"

- How do you think the world would be different if everyone followed the Ten Commandments?



## The Moral Teachings of Jesus

*[Jesus said] "But what comes out of a person, that is what defiles. From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly."*

Mark 7:20–22

Jesus did more than affirm the Ten Commandments. He challenged us to aim for an even higher standard—a morality based on love. Jesus questioned old beliefs that allowed hatred and revenge. He told us it was not enough to follow the law if our hearts were full of anger and hatred.

Jesus was urging us to move beyond legalism—obeying a list of laws—to a morality that truly fosters love. When we choose to obey the speed limits, we should do so out of respect for the safety and well-being of others—not simply because it's the law and we don't want a ticket. When we choose to avoid saying something untrue about another person, we should be motivated by our love and respect for the children of God—not just the need to obey the Ten Commandments.

## Conscience and the Church

Catholics believe that we have another resource to help us form good consciences—the teachings of the Church. Jesus is present in his Church and has given its leaders the authority to speak and act in his name. New Testament Christians looked to their leaders for guidance in moral questions, like when the Corinthians wrote to Paul for advice (1 Corinthians 7:1). All New Testament letters offered moral guidance, and some gave rules of conduct in matters of Church organization, relationships with one another, and daily life.

Since then, the Catholic Church has provided moral leadership for its members through laws and instruction from pastors, bishops, and popes. Church leaders strive to understand and teach how the Gospel applies to modern life.



Catholics trust that Church leaders continue to be guided by the Holy Spirit. As we seek to make good moral choices, it's important to know the moral teachings of the Church and, more importantly, to understand the reasons behind these teachings. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a great place to start if you have questions on Church teaching, but your sponsor or parish priest can be great resources, too.

## Forming Your Conscience

When we are faced with moral decisions, there are several steps we can take to make sure our consciences are well-formed:

1. Take the time or make the time for prayerful reflection. Make sure you can hear the small voice within.
2. Know and understand the Ten Commandments, and then ask yourself, "What would be the morally right thing to do?"
3. Know and understand the teachings of the Church. If a Church teaching is confusing, don't be afraid to discuss that issue with a priest or well-informed Catholic.
4. If you make a mistake, seek forgiveness and grow from what you've learned.

With a partner, make up a scenario that would require you to make a difficult choice.

Work through steps 1 to 4 under "Forming Your Conscience" and come up with a way to handle that scenario. Share with the rest of the group.

Recall a time when you did something wrong that you later regretted.

If you were faced with that situation again, how would you respond?



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