

# Understanding and Building the Conscience of the Adolescent

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## Introduction

- > During adolescence a conscience crisis occurs. Under the impact of increased intellectual ability, greater physical maturity, an enlarged world view, and most of all peer pressures, the teenager begins to reevaluate his standards.
- > When the adolescent begins to think for himself, he sees the biased rigidity of some of his parents' standards. As he searches for his identity, he also feels compelled to assert his independence from his parents. Some of this is good. If the adolescent never learns to think for himself, he will always be a "yes-man." His values and ideals will never be his own; he will simply be a puppet of his parents, or of some other person.

## I. THE TEENAGER'S NORMAL RESPONSES

1. As a part of finding his identity, the **typical teenager rethinks** some of his morality.
2. **He may outwardly rebel** against a few of his parents' values just to see if he can get away with it. Largely, this is trying to be his own person.
3. **He is trying to separate himself** both from his parents and from their internalized ideals. He is probably somewhat at sea as he tries to sort out his own beliefs and value system.
4. **In this process he is also trying to find** his own personal identity, worth, and purpose in life.

## II. THE PARENTS' PERSONAL CHALLENGE

1. **The sensitive parent is ready for this challenge.** Instead of vainly struggling to keep his teenager at an immature, internalized, or fear-based level of morality, he encourages this newfound search for personal values and identity.
2. **The sensitive parent allows the teenager to think for himself,** but in an open way discusses the reasons for supporting biblical truth and morality.

Sometimes this process is difficult for us as parents; we have invested a great deal of energy in our value systems, and we react to any questioning it. This plays into the hands of the growing adolescent. Whenever he upsets us, he feels he is strong; he knows he has won a victory. His time of feeling weak or unnoticed is passed; he now has the power to upset us. This is an unfortunate occurrence.

3. **A wise parent is flexible for he** is willing to reevaluate his own position in the Word of God, his values and his morality. He may even see that some of his taboos and values are not specifically mentioned in the Scriptures.

4. **A wise parent majors in biblical principles** and non-defensively gives his personal reasons for his own convictions.

At the same time, he gradually allows his teenager to assume greater responsibility in determining a personal set of values.

5. **The sensitive parent does not claim** the power of divine inspiration to force his adolescent into conformity to his personal convictions.

*If we are convinced of the accuracy of the Bible and the ministry of the Holy Spirit we will be willing to let God lead our teenager into His truth without coercion.*

*This process may seem frightening, but we must remain willing to lead and to listen. We must be willing to quietly discuss and teach truth, but we will not condemn, coerce, or angrily try to force our values on our children.*

*This will require good parent-teen communication, for it is perhaps the most crucial element of our growing youth's developing morality and personal convictions.*

### III. THE FEATURES OF A MATURE CONSCIENCE

The mature conscience should be operating well by late adolescence and early adulthood.

1. **Hypothetically, his conscience should be free from the necessity of external controls and restraint.** The mature person does not need to be motivated by the fear of others or by an inner sense of self-punishment.
2. **He judges each situation on the basis of its merits.** He considers the positive and negative consequences of his actions to himself and to others.
3. **He refrains from wrong because of its effect** on others and because of his relationship to the Lord he loves. He follows God's commandments out of love, out of a desire to do the helpful thing for others, and for the cause of Christ.

As Christians we shouldn't be motivated merely to avoid punishment; Christ has paid for all our sins. Nor should we be motivated merely to remove our own guilty feelings -- for this is selfish. As Christians we are aware of a number of divine absolutes in the area of personal living. We do not question what God has said, but at the same time we do consider how God's Word applies to daily life, and we do not just fulfill it blindly.

4. **He questions things realistically.**
  - a. The person who immediately conforms to every authoritative comment is usually a dependent or a fear-oriented person.
  - b. He lacks a sense of individuality and self confidence and he is afraid to question.
  - c. At first it may seem that he is mature because of his unquestioning stance.
  - d. But usually he has been coerced, and later when independent he will fall into grievous sin because he was not allowed to come to his own personal convictions.
  - e. While biblical standards are absolute and authoritative, they do have sound logic behind them.

- f. God does not say, "Do this because I say so!" Instead, He points out that His commands are for our good and for the good of others around us.

**Note:**

- > *An unquestioning faith that fails to ask "why?" is actually naive.*
- > *God does not expect us to blindly follow all His guidelines, but instead to trust Him fully, to walk by faith and in knowing His Word we will understand His will.*
- > *God wants us to be sensitive to the needs of others and to follow His guidance out of love.*

*Also, some think they are mature because they accept nothing without doubting. These people pride themselves on their intellect and their sophistication. They accept a Biblical standard only when it conforms to their logic. They may rebel against authority and refuse to accept any authority beyond their own.*

**5. The mature person with a biblically motivated conscience combines these two seemingly opposing traits.**

1. He recognizes the value of authority and is willing to put himself under biblical authority.
2. He is convinced of the accuracy of the Bible and its pronouncements in moral areas.

*When he comes to a statement contrary to his own opinions, he thinks, "I wonder why that is there? From my perspective it doesn't seem necessary. But I have experienced the new birth and God's faithfulness, and I know it must be there for our benefit. I will try to understand why, but if I don't, I will accept it as important even though I don't understand its purpose just now."*

***Understanding the Kinds of Control that We Exercise as Parents, and Their Value***

<b>Step</b>	<b>Type of Control</b>	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Disadvantages</b>	<b>Appropriate Age</b>
I	Physical Restraint	1) Protects young child from physical dangers	1) Requires constant supervision	Birth - 2 year with occasional restraints later, but diminishing
IIA	Punishment and Fear of an external authority	1) Protects child from dangers 2) Begins to teach child right and wrong. 3) Protects rights and property of others	1) Punishment requires continual presence of authority 2) Punishment must be severe and frequent in physical discipline to maintain standards 3) Punishment can cause dependency, hostility 4) Motive for morality can be self-centered (to avoid punishment)	9 months - 4 or 5 years with great lessening of direct parental intervention over time.

IIB	Respect of Consequences!	1) Teaches negative consequences of some behavior without parental force or fear motivation		Throughout life
III	Internalized Parent	1) Protects rights and property of others 2) Protects self from consequences of negative actions. 3) Doesn't require continual presence of an authority 4) Teaches socialized responses such as manners and neatness 5) Leads to good self-image to the degree that the internalization is of a loving, accepting parent	1) Motive for morality is self-centered to the degree that the internalization is of fear and guilt. 2) Morality tends to be rigid and limited to that taught by parents and significant authorities. 3) May be associated with a condemning attitude toward others who violate one's standards 4) Self-punishment raises anxiety and depression and lowers self image.	2 or 3 years -- until adolescence. This process occurs through all of life, but is especially prominent in the first 10 or 12 years.
IV	Adolescent Choices	1) Helps morality become the teen's own chosen one rather than simply an imitation of his parents 2) Broadens and creates a more sensitive morality	1) May involve temporary rebellion	Most of, or all of, the teen years
V.	Mature Morality and Biblical value system	1) Protects rights and the privileges of others 2) Protects self from the consequences of one's own negative and sinful actions. 3) Doesn't require presence of an authority 4) Maintains mature consideration of others 5) Maintains a flexible, sensitive (but not a condemning) conscience - showing concern for self and others. Seeks to apply the Word of God 6) Maintains healthy self-image, biblical self-worth, and a sense of individuality		Adolescence into adulthood

***We should be moving toward level five on the above chart as we apply truth unto maturity.***

This depends upon a parent teaching, training, and molding the lives of teens through the power of the Word of God as the authority for life.

The Word of God must become authoritative. It must be that which molds the life... building character, defining purpose, and controlling life-style.

### ***Summarizing Our Concept of the Goal of Maturity***

#### ***People with mature consciences can:***

1. Respect the right and privileges of others because they have a sense of warmth, empathy, and concern.
2. See the consequences of behavior for both self and others, and act according to those implications.
3. Respect authority and learn from the guidance of others.
4. Think independently and rationally, not bound on the one hand by inner fears of punishment or a sense of guilt, or on the other hand by a rebellious attitude which rejects all authority but one's own.
5. Accept divine absolutes and the leading of the Holy Spirit while seeking to understand their implications and continuing to accept them, even when they are divergent from our reasoning.
6. Make all moral decisions out of a mature love for God, ourselves, and others.
7. The Word of God is that which controls their decisions and conditions their conscience toward an active, determined godly life that honors God.

*The foregoing pages are adapted from "An Ounce of Prevention," by Dr. Bruce Narramore.*