

# *Cultivating a Conscience*

James 3:1-12

One of the more intriguing news stories of recent times is one that potentially has far-reaching implications, not only for citizens of this country, but for what it means to be a person of faith as well. It pits in conflict some of our most enduring values: the freedom of the individual conscience and our collective commitment toward fairness and equality under our constitution.

As you might surmise, the story I am referring to is about Kim Davis, the celebrated county clerk in Kentucky who, by refusing to allow her office to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples, found herself in jail last week for contempt of court. She was released a few days later, but has remained defiant in her *cause célèbre*. With her lawyers by her side, she has stood her ground arguing that her freedom of conscience on the basis of her religious beliefs excuses her from abiding by the laws of the land. This has raised a very interesting legal argument as to the role of an individual's conscience in relation to their constitutional rights and to the laws of our commonwealth.

As I've thought about it, the matter of conscience isn't necessarily all that easy to sort out. Certainly, Kim Davis' "conscientious objection" is based on her religious beliefs, which would have been respected had she simply stood aside, rather than prohibiting others in her office from issuing marriage licenses. That's how we might expect an individual to behave when their job requirements conflict with their personal beliefs. That's the principle behind "conscientious objection." However, Davis and her lawyers

argue that she must actively defy the law mainly because her name would still remain on the issued licenses as the elected official, even if she didn't cooperate with the order. Her defiance is based on her right not to be coerced to be associated with something (by virtue of her office) that would go against her moral conscience. It raises some significant issues constitutionally, as well as what we should expect of our elected officials.

But then there are other sides to this story. Is Davis' objection the only conscience to consider? What about the rights of those who have wanted to marry but were prohibited from doing so, yet now have that legal right? If she has been elected and is compensated for the duty of issuing marriage licenses, how else can the rights of those who want to be married be respected and honored? Why is their desire to do the right thing in the eyes of the law thwarted by someone who disagrees with their right?

Or, if this is argued as a matter of religious belief, what about the consciences of those who are influenced by religious values that support loving and just relationships, as well as to fight longstanding injustice and prejudice against LGBTQ men and women? Are these religious values not legitimate as well?

Then, on a purely practical level, what about those who in good conscience wish to obey the court order and issue the licenses because they believe it's the right thing to do, whether or not they agree with the change in practice? Or what about those who believe (based on their religious convictions) certain behaviors are sinful, but still consider equal treatment under the law a more important social and

moral value than allowing for any form of discrimination? Whose religious values take precedent?

The point is, there are many different views and values that shape individual consciences. Uniformity is not reality when it comes to individual beliefs and moral priorities. In our pluralistic society, one can't presume that the values which influence one's own conscience and judgment reflect the same values (or the same level of priority of importance) as another person's conscience. People differ in their moral judgments as they do in their life experiences and background.

So whose conscience matters? Whose opinion or perspective is respected above all? Whose religious or moral values hold sway? These are very relevant questions which will be wrestled out in the courts in the coming months and years. They also factor into how an individual's conscience is balanced by the greater interests of society. As history shows, moral values and laws evolve over time as the social or political contexts change or when a broader range of perspectives and new information are taken into account. Even then, there is still a place for conscientious objection, as the changes in law don't necessarily alter every influence that bears upon the human conscience. In other words, laws may change, but people may not change with them. Individuals are still free to decide what makes sense to them, morally and spiritually, even if it's in direct defiance to existing laws. This is case that Kim Davis and her supporters are making.

Now at this point, it becomes interesting, because the religious freedom argument presupposes something which actually is not true.

That is, that a Christian's faith depends solely on the moral authority of the Bible. That's a traditional Christian view all across the political and theological spectrum. Certainly, I agree, speaking as a pastor and person of faith, that the Bible should have a principal role in helping us cultivate our moral conscience. But I don't think this ends up being a simple matter of trust and obey. Let me explain.

Despite the classic insistence on biblical authority, with people relying on terms such as "inerrancy" or "infallibility" to prevent any deviation from orthodox belief, the truth is, the authority for what we glean from the Bible doesn't come from the pages of Scripture. It actually lies within us in our moral reasoning more than with the text itself. That might sound heretical and offend some sensibilities, but I believe it's always been that way down through the ages for everyone.

What I mean is, each person interprets and makes judgments about what is right and true and what seems false and wrong based on their own conscience and what they accept as truth and choose to follow. Even if one believes the Bible is infallible and the final arbiter of human morality, a great difficulty lies in the fact that we can't possibly hold everything that is recorded from Genesis to Revelation as bearing equal moral weight (if something has moral weight at all, for that matter). Moral authority gets even more squirrely due to the fact that each person make judgments as to what is morally authoritative to them and what is not. That's the fallacy of presuming the Bible is the ultimate and universal a moral and religious authority that supersedes all other laws, because that assumes we can all agree on its interpretation and relevance to matters of life. Whether or not this is acknowledged, each person ultimately makes their own

judgment on what it says and decides what something will mean in any given context.

Functionally, that's how it works. Even the most wooden literalist uses an interpretative lens through which to make judgments about what is relevant to his or her situation, simply because the contexts and worldviews of the ancient world and our 21<sup>st</sup> century are entirely different. One can't cherry-pick a verse or a moral law out of the pages of Scripture without being forced to fill in this gap of time and context and using some common sense about how and where it applies, especially when it pushes up against some other important values that are already held.

We know things change over time. There are plenty of mores and norms and laws that we no longer follow. We don't stone people for adultery; we don't punish them for wearing clothes of mixed fabrics, or condemn those who eat lobster, as was done when these were part of the covenantal laws of Israel. We don't expect people to pluck out their eyes or cut off their hands if they lust, as a literal reading of Jesus' words would suggest. The point is, context matters, both ancient and contemporary; we interpret the relevance of any text to see if it is agreeable to our consciences, which actually serve as the primary moral lens we have. The individual conscience always has been the moral interpreter from a stubborn literalist to the most laissez faire or libertine reader.

Now if it seems like everything then is relative, with no certainty or moral absolutes, this is where we recognize and affirm the classic Christian belief that the Spirit of God inspires our consciences while interpreting texts, by helping us take note of things and glean insights

which speak to us in the moment and apply to each person's circumstances, experiences, and wisdom. So when looking for the moral authority of Scripture, one considers not only what the text says, but what do we want to glean from the text and what do we need to hear, which usually is determined by our individual Spirit-inspired consciences.

Frankly, that's how our consciences operate. They serve as our interpretive moral lens, guiding us on what we sense is right and wrong, providing wisdom and insight largely shaped by our life experiences, relationships, settings, and reasoning, through which we try to determine what is right and what is wrong, usually by projecting or forecasting the consequences of our actions. God's Spirit, we believe, aids us in this process. But, even so, no human conscience can claim to interpret God's truth infallibly.

For this reason, when it comes to moral reasoning and judgments, it is wise to approach everything with a genuine sense of modesty and perspective about what we do and don't know—listening to the insights of many others instead of presuming anything to be an absolute and universal truth, applicable to each and every situation (especially if it's a punitive judgment). Climbing up on a soapbox with a moral verdict about someone or something, and insisting that everyone else agree with you and your convictions, not only comes across as arrogant or ignorant, it also misses the beauty of what I believe God intended for Christian community, in particular. That is, it's meant to be a place of discernment and for sharing wisdom.

Baptists, in our best moments, have always valued freedom of conscience, recognizing that God speaks to and through not merely

the pastor and the pulpit, but in and through the problems, providences, and perspectives of everyone's life. That's why we affirm the "priesthood of all believers." Everyone has a voice. Quite honestly, we should do away with the pulpit and place ourselves in a circle of chairs, so we can level the playing field and listen to each other. We falsely presume that the only opinion that matters is that of the pastor or spiritual leader. Believe me, you already know that's not true!

Maybe the Quakers have even a better sense of this than anyone else. Silence to ponder and consider the opinions of others goes a long way in helping to produce wise judgments and actions. In addition, they use consensus (not a majority vote) to arrive at important decisions—a decision-making approach that may not be efficient, but it usually produces wise results that everyone can live with.

Cultivating a conscience isn't something we really do independent of the people and the community we engage. The reason is, people benefit from not only listening to others, but also in exercising the grace, humility, generosity, and considerate mercy that every person deserves as they try to figure out what is the right thing to do. The wisdom for life doesn't come mapped out for us in a sacred text as much as we'd like it to; instead, it emerges through study, reflection, thoughtful conversation, prayer, and wisdom-seeking, usually among a group of trusted friends.

I have to believe the writer of James had a sense of this, as throughout our text for today is an appeal to humility, modesty, wise perspective, and, most of all, sensitivity to every person in this early

Christian community. Whether he was addressing the overbearing rich craving attention, or opinionated people insisting that their views be heard as authoritative teaching, or self-aggrandizing critics who relentlessly put down their opponents, or unstable individuals being swept up by every emotion in their lives, or the self-serving interests getting into everyone's way, his counsel for humility, cooperation, mutual service, and spiritual wisdom for cultivating a conscientious life was always to the point. Hear some of these verses once again:

Not many of you should become teachers...for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes...

No one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison...

From the same mouth come blessing and cursing, this ought not to be so.

Then, there are some we didn't read earlier:

Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God's righteousness... (1:19-20)

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves... (1:22)

...so who are you to judge your neighbor? (4:12b)

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. (4:10)

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. (3:13)

None of these statements promote anger and defiance. All these things are indicators of a well-developed conscience and conscientious life—one that discerns what is right and what is not based in a spirit of love and grace with humility, in company with and consideration of others. Defiance becomes less of a prophetic need when the company you keep actually listens to and considers the views you offer.

Frankly, those are the same reasons why you and I come and participate in this beloved community of Christ in Noank. We cultivate our consciences in company with those who share similar values and hope for the world. We come, not only with the freedom to worship, but with a freedom of conscience to interpret what we learn as best we can into our daily lives. We come not to judge or exclude anyone, but to discern the truth of God in life for each and every person, both here and elsewhere, as alike and as different as we are in our perspectives and thinking, so we may more effectively and meaningfully live into the love that Christ has for all people. That's why there should be a place for everyone at the table.

May that be true of us. May our consciences be well-cultivated within this company we keep, and may our lives, as a result, be purposely authentic, morally aware, spiritually wise, and transparently true to the glory of God and Christ our Redeemer.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes  
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT  
13 September 2015