

# Journey of Faith



## In Short:

- Morality is ordered by God, who gives us free will to choose right or wrong.
- Jesus' teachings, the Bible, and the Church help us form good consciences.
- God calls us to reflect on our choices and behaviors in the light of love.



## Following Your Conscience

**Conscience** is our sense of the moral goodness or evil of a thing. Our conscience helps us to discern right from wrong and to accept the responsibility to choose what's right.

Saint Paul wrote that our basic notions of right and wrong come from God:

*"The demands of the law are written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness."*

Romans 2:15

## Christian Moral Living

Jesus promised, "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). We accept Jesus Christ as our guide, believing that his words and example teach us the best way to live. We try to apply his teachings to the decisions of daily life. But God gives us free will, the freedom to receive or reject his love, to choose to do right or wrong.

*"Jesus said, 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.'"*

Matthew 7:21

*"For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor."*

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World  
(*Gaudium et Spes*), 16

*"The perfection of the moral good consists in man's being moved to the good not only by his will but also by his 'heart.'"*

CCC 1775

- How can we know God's will? How do we know what choices to make?



Important choices shouldn't be subjective or emotional decisions. The teachings of Jesus Christ, the Bible, and the guidance of the Church help us form a good conscience.

- What laws are written in your heart?



## Jesus Echoes the Old Testament

Our source for the study of Christ's teachings is the Bible, and our starting point is love:

*"You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

Matthew 22:37–39

Jesus was echoing the Old Testament: the greatest and first commandment is from Deuteronomy (6:4–5) and the second from Leviticus (19:18).

When Jesus was asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" [Jesus replied], "You know the commandments: 'You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and your mother'" (Mark 10:17, 19).

The Jews accepted the Ten Commandments as God's will. While escaping from slavery in Egypt, God gave the Israelites the commandments to keep them from falling into slavery to sin. These standards of morality have stood the test of time.

Find the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament (Exodus 20:1–20, Deuteronomy 5:1–21) and reflect on the question below.

- How would our world be different if everyone obeyed the Ten Commandments?



## The Law of Love Replaces Legalism

Jesus did more than affirm the Ten Commandments. He gave us a higher standard: "You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (Matthew 5:21–22). He said we must avoid lustful thoughts, not just adultery, and abandon old patterns that allowed divorce, revenge, and hatred in favor of love.

The Pharisees imposed strict requirements through their legal interpretations, based on their reading of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). When Jesus' disciples were hungry and began to pick heads of grain, the Pharisees accused them of harvesting, an activity forbidden on the Sabbath (Exodus 34:21). Jesus defended his followers, claiming the Sabbath was made for people and not people for the Sabbath (Mark 2:23–28). Love and life trump legalism.

In another example that scandalized the Pharisees, the Old Testament designated some food as unclean—not to be eaten, but Jesus challenged that. He explained that what we eat cannot make us unclean, but thoughts, words, and deeds that come from our hearts can (Mark 7:18–23).

In his teaching, Jesus urged us to move beyond legalism to what truly brings love. He said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). Laws are necessary and good, but Christ's followers must view them according to Christ's mind and heart.

*"Jesus said, '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.'"*

Matthew 7:24–25

- How can you build your life on the rock of Jesus' words?



## The Church Guides Us

The teachings of the Church also help us form our consciences. Jesus is present in his Church and has given its leaders the authority to speak and act in his name.

Jesus told his disciples to go to all nations, “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). After his ascension, the apostles applied the commands of Jesus to the situations they encountered. The New Testament letters to early Christian communities offer moral guidance, and some give rules of conduct in matters of Church organization, relationships, and daily life.

The Church provides moral leadership through laws and instruction from pastors, bishops, and popes. While it’s true that we are collectively the Church, each of us doesn’t have the same authority or perform the same function. Saint Paul makes it clear that some members have the duty to guide us:

*“And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”*

*Ephesians 4:11–12*

Today, people face moral problems previous generations couldn’t have imagined. Church leaders help us to apply the gospel to modern life. The Church provides moral leadership in many forms and in sometimes complex ways. But beautifully simple principles underlie them all: Avoid evil and pursue good. Follow the Golden Rule: treat others as you would like to be treated. Respect your fellow humans and their consciences (see CCC 1789).

*“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, on your own intelligence do not rely; In all your ways be mindful of him, and he will make straight your paths.”*

*Proverbs 3:5–6*

- How open are you to seeking and following the guidance of the Catholic Church in matters of morality?



## Teachers Inspire Us

Throughout Church history, there have been great teachers of moral theology and the spiritual life. They have helped form the consciences of generations of Catholics.

Some theologians and spiritual writers are qualified to offer moral guidance by reason of their education, experience, and adherence to Church teaching. The common practice of good Catholics, who are led by the Holy Spirit, can also guide us.

- Think of Catholics who have influenced you. What guides them?



### STOP Method for Forming and Informing Your Conscience

**S**earch out facts (consult Church teaching, scientific information, Bible, teachings of Jesus, instruction of moral theologians) by asking what, why, who, where, when, and how.

**T**hink about alternatives to your proposed action and consider consequences.

**O**thers should be consulted (faithful Catholics who’ve dealt with this question, others affected or involved), and the effect on others should be considered.

**P**ray for guidance.

### Living Like Christ

It’s possible to mistakenly assume that our goal in life is to avoid sin, but our real goal is to become more like Jesus, to act out of love rather than out of a sense of obligation.

The love of Christ challenges us to work for peace and social justice and to have concern for the poor. Christ cautioned us that our eternal destiny will be determined by our readiness to help others and reminded us that whatever we do for others is done for him (see Matthew 25:31–46).

The way we relate to our family, friends, coworkers, and people on the street should be a result of our relationship with Christ. Our business decisions, political choices, and social relationships should be in harmony with what Christ would do if he were in our place.

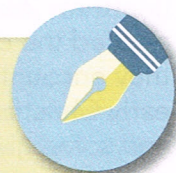
Living our lives in harmony with the love of Christ may put us at odds with secular society. At times, we may make choices that lead others to question our motivation. Our response: "We are followers of Jesus Christ."

*"This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

*John 13:35*

- Recall a situation when you had to choose between right and wrong. How did you decide what to do?

- When have others not understood your choice to act like Christ?



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