



## HOW TO TELL RIGHT FROM WRONG – JUST FOLLOW YOUR CONSCIENCE

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Is it really that simple?

Yes, No, Maybe!

Yes, it's simple; but, not quite THAT simple.

When faced with a moral decision, often people will say just follow your conscience and indeed that is what we all must do. But how do we hear our conscience and is it possible to follow one's conscience and still be wrong? Although the Catholic Church teaches a principle called "primacy of conscience" which means that conscience is the ultimate authority and we are compelled to follow it even if it conflicts with church teaching, the Church also teaches that we must make the effort to have an "informed" conscience. In other words, it's not just a matter of doing what feels good. So how does a person of integrity develop a well-formed Christian conscience? Following are negative traps and positive steps to consider in coming to decisions of conscience.

### Traps to Conscience Formation:

1. **Rationalization** – Sometimes we so strongly want to do something (or avoid doing something) that we talk ourselves into it. We might use logic to justify what we want to do even though an unbiased outsider could see the flaws in our logic. For example, when faced with paying our annual income tax, it's tempting to think, "Hey, lots of rich people get exorbitant tax breaks, is it really so wrong for me to fudge a little on my income, especially when my family is struggling financially?"
2. **Scrupulosity** – The opposite of rationalizing of course is being overly scrupulous about the letter of the law while missing its spirit. An example from my childhood was the practice of not eating meat on Friday. My dear godparents use to take me out for a lobster dinner every Good Friday. Technically we were keeping the law, but... For members of an organization, it might mean sometimes praying less "correctly" or putting aside a rule for the good of a member. This has pitfalls of course but when unsure, we go back to the old standby, "What Would Jesus Do?"
3. **Going along with the crowd** – How could so many people be wrong? For years most adults didn't think twice about driving after drinking. Just because it's common, doesn't make it right. Even when I am in the minority, I need to have the courage to use my voice respectfully. Decisions are stronger when many different voices are considered.
4. **If it feels good, do it** – Conscience is not an emotion. It may not coincide with happiness, at least not fleeting feelings of bliss. Eating a dozen donuts may feel good – temporarily, but long term it eats away at one's health. Conversely, taking medicine or studying for a test might not be pleasant but are conscientious things to do. Sometimes dramatic actions (protests, irate letters to the editor, demonstrations) make us feel good because at least we're DOING something. Sometimes, however, the action might be restraint.
5. **It's my body; it's my business** – Just because I'm not directly harming another person does not mean my action is good. Drug addictions or pornography may seem like victimless crimes, but they not only hurt the doer, they weaken the moral milieu of our

society. The corollary to this is that at times I AM my brother's keeper, and at times an injustice compels me to act. To do nothing to right a wrong of society or the Church can be a sin of omission.

**Steps to forming a mature, responsible, Christian conscience:**

Although there are probably many valid ways to check one's conscience to avoid falling into the above traps, using the STOP method is an easy to remember framework.

**S – Study.** Decisions of conscience begin with knowledge. It's not so much a matter of being smart but rather making a serious effort to learn the facts from credible sources, i.e. read what the Church teaches, consult experts in the field; don't just go on hearsay or internet blogs.

**T – Think Together.** It is best not to make decisions alone, in isolation. In marriage this means a couple should not make an important moral decision alone but rather discuss it together and come up with a mutually agreeable decision. In faith communities it means testing the decision out with other believers and trying to come to consensus. In both situations it includes evaluating and weighing the information that has been gathered in the Study phase.

**O – Others.** Not only is it necessary to get the objective facts, wisdom is also carried by others who have had experience with the issue one is deliberating. Consulting with those who agree, and even more importantly those who might disagree, is a way to check rationalizations.

**P – Pray.** Important decisions should always be brought to prayer so that we can check our rationalizations and be honest before God. Prayer provides us time to listen and sort. It is not the same as waiting for a magical sign from God of what to do, but rather noticing if I am at peace with the emerging decision.

**Criteria for well-formed decisions:**

Done all the steps? Checked for traps? Still not sure? The Cliff Notes version of conscience formation could be summed up by asking oneself two questions. Is my contemplated decision LIFE GIVING and GENEROUS? A well-formed conscience does not simply apply rules but brings the whole self to the decision and weighs how my decision will impact the common good.

**That's not the end.**

Decisions are meaningless without actions. It can be satisfying to some just to keep thinking, and sorting, and weighing, and even praying. There comes a time, however, when a person of conscience has to ACT in a public way. It might mean doing an action that stretches my comfort level or is inconvenient. It might mean taking a risk – financially, emotionally, physically. It could mean risking employment or embarrassment. It might mean acting when my organization would rather keep talking, or doesn't want to invest the self-discipline to come up with a concrete plan. We'd just rather complain. Ah, what cost discipleship!