The Power of Integrity

Second in the 2017 Lenten series “Jesus Speaks to Our Times”

# Scripture: Matthew 22:15-22; 23:16-33

# Key Thought: We strive to imitate Jesus’ integrity, which impressed even His enemies.

# Intro:

I saw on the news a story of a pastor in Sierra Leone, West Africa, named Emmanuel Momoh who is also a local chief in his area. He found a huge diamond-- 706 karats worth, only a little smaller than a hockey puck. Pastor Momoh was engaged in freelance diamond hunting, digging in river sediment when he made the find. Rather than smuggling the diamond out for private gain, he turned it over to President Ernest Koroma so the diamond can be sold to benefit his country. It is worth about 5 million dollars and the Pastor wants the money to go toward development projects. Kono, where the diamond was found, was at the center of the "blood diamond" trade that financed Sierra Leone's brutal civil war between 1991 and 2002. The President thanked the Pastor for donating the gem. Mines and Mineral Resources Minister Minkailu Mansaray called the diamond a gift to the country, adding that proceeds from its sale would be used for the good of the people.

How does one get a heart that is that generous? How does one become a leader with that kind of integrity?

Integrity is something we often take for granted when it is present but we notice the lack of it very quickly when it is missing. There is nothing quite like a lack of integrity in a leader for producing a crisis.

The word integrity is also used of the quality of construction.

When something is well built, we say it has structural integrity.  So in an earthquake, the building with excellent structural integrity survives.  When something physically collapses, we say it didn’t have the integrity to withstand the impact.

Many people aren’t withstanding crises well these days. The storm buffets and they collapse along with their family or their organization. The tension is that no one sees the problem until the storm hits. ‘Normal’ doesn’t really test your integrity.   Crises do.  But when a crisis comes, it’s often too late to fix what’s wrong.   Carey Nieuwhof

But if moral integrity is present when a crisis hits, it will help carry us through the crisis safely.

What is integrity and how do we get it? It is not so easy to write create a short definition for it.

Even Webster’s has a little trouble doing that. My dictionary gave three definitions. The first two concern how we use the word of construction materials or bridges or buildings having integrity. The third definition is the one we need today. It reads: The quality or state of being of sound moral principle; uprightness, honesty, and sincerity (Webster’s New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition).

Our method this morning for learning more about the meaning of moral integrity is to look at the example of Jesus and others in Scripture.

# What is integrity?

## The example of Jesus

In the passage that we read this morning, we noticed that even Jesus’ enemies acknowledged that he had integrity.

They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. Matt 22:16

The Greek word translated as integrity here in the NIV is translated as “sincere” in the NRSV and as “true” in the ESV. It comes from the Greek word that refers to something that is genuine, the opposite of false; it is not concealed, it is true to fact or truthful. (Abbot-Smith)

So Jesus demonstrated integrity of character because he taught the truth in the same way no matter who was listening. He did not change the message to fit the audience. So a person of integrity is not influenced away from what they feel is right by money or promises of new status or prestige. A person of integrity does not change their teaching, their stance, their vote on an issue to impress people or to gain personal advantage.

## The example of Paul

Now let’s consider a couple passages found in Paul’s writings. We will see that Paul, as a disciple of Jesus had learned to have integrity too.

So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God. 1 Cor 3:21-23

In Corinth, there were unhealthy divisions between competing factions loyal to different early church leaders. Instead of rooting for his faction, Paul deliberately steered credit away from himself. He put Christ in the leading position and himself on a par with other early church leaders with whom he was completely willing to share recognition. Only a leader with real integrity of motive does that. Paul wanted to see the church succeed, not his name built up.

One of the key characteristics of a person with integrity is that their self-interest has been subjugated to the higher goal. They are not controlled by self-interest but by higher goals. Many human leaders are very jealous to get credit, to be in the limelight, to be the focus of attention. But not so with people of Christian integrity.

## The example of Samuel and his sons

But his sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice. 1 Sam 8:3

Samuel’s integrity was shown in contrast to his sons. They accepted bribes and used their position to earn money dishonestly. But Samuel had not done that. Handling of money is a key gauge of integrity. If a person is not trustworthy in handling money that is not their own, they do not have integrity. If they can handle money honestly, they probably have integrity.

## Let’s look at another Pauline passage.

Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. 2 Cor. 4:1, 2

Paul is speaking here of relying on integrity to recommend his message. He is not using any deceptive tricks, nothing behind the curtain as in the movie Wizard of Oz, nothing faked, and nothing to be ashamed of when it is later revealed. So a person of integrity does not use tricks or fakery. He wants people to sense the genuineness of his message through his integrity. This kind of person is not putting on a front. They are the same in public as in private. Whenever you meet them you sense their genuineness.

Integrity means that you are the same in public as you are in private. Joyce Meyer <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/j/joycemeyer567651.html>

For example, if this kind of person is opposed to a casino at Bradley airport, they also don’t buy lottery tickets with their own money. Their opposition to the gambling industry has integrity.

Integrity as a method that commends the message is the path of the true Christian pastor. It is also the best method for any business leader as well. People follow leaders who are not false but are genuine and have integrity.

The supreme quality for leadership is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible, no matter whether it is on a section gang, a football field, in an army, or in an office. Dwight D. Eisenhower <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/d/dwightdei109026.html>

Proverbs says,

Better the poor walking in integrity than one of perverse of speech who is a fool.
Prov 19:1 NRSV

## Summary

So we have found several characteristics of people of moral integrity.

* People with Integrity are not influenced to be one way with one group and another way with another group.
* People of integrity have the kind of good character that has no deception or falseness about it.
* A person with integrity of character is the same in private or before people.
* A person of integrity has high motives. They are not motived primarily by self-interest but by a higher cause or by the interests of others.
* A person of integrity handles money and possessions ethically.

# Integrity provides a guideline for character building.

As disciples, our object is to grow to be like Christ. The Bible tells us to:

Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. 2 Peter 3:18

So one of the ways that we need to grow to be like Jesus is to grow in integrity. I think growing in integrity is important because integrity provides a guideline for character building.

Let me illustrate it like this. Carpenters have something called a straight edge. Usually it’s part of a square but a level might be used too. They use it to draw lines on the lumber that they are going to cut. They want the line to be straight so that the cut will be straight. If they pick up any old piece of lumber and use it to make the line, the line will follow the curvature of the piece of lumber they pick up. It may or may not be straight. But if they use the straight edge, the line will always be straight. Whether the pencil is drawn along the straight edge on a piece of plywood, a large kiln-dried plank, a piece of floor tile or used barn board, the line will be straight and the cut will be straight.

Integrity is like a straight edge. It influences how we think in all many areas of our lives And it provides a high standard for our behavior.

In fact in the Old Testament one of the Hebrew words used to define the characteristic we call integrity is sometimes translated as “straight.” The Complete Jewish Bible translates as “straightforward.”

All the words of my mouth are righteous; there is nothing twisted or crooked in them.
They are all straight to one who understands and right to those who find knowledge. Prov 8:8-9 NRSV

Allow me to illustrate how integrity provides a standard. Many years ago, when I first signed up to go online, I was very concerned about all the X-rated material that is online and the aggressive way that it is marketed. I knew of pastors who had failed in their ministry because they had been trapped by immoral viewing habits. In those days, computers did not have the family safeguards that they do now either so I signed up with a family-friendly Internet provider service that screens your Internet input. It is called integrity.com. It blocks morally offensive images. But interestingly enough, blocking bad images, is no longer its primary function. I have found that having an email address with the word integrity in it is a constant spiritual challenge to me. Are all the clicks that I make in keeping with that word? I am sad to confess that over the years, I have made some clicks, unfortunately, that did not trigger the digital sensors, but they did trigger my conscience. For integrity is a higher standard than a digital program. I had to repent of them. But I am thankful to report that I have refused many more potentially tempting clicks because they did not meet the standard of the concept called “integrity.” What really surprised me is this. I found myself asking more questions on issues that had nothing to do with the computer. Can my actions, my thinking, my reactions to my wife, be described by the word integrity? You see, integrity is something that we either have in pretty much all of our life or we don’t have it anywhere. It is a characteristic that if it is part of our character, then it will spread into all areas of our lives.

Real integrity is doing the right thing, knowing that nobody's going to know whether you did it or not. Oprah Winfrey <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/o/oprahwinfr386951.html>

As Proverbs states;

The righteous walk in integrity — happy are the children who follow them!
Prov 20:7 NRSV

# Integrity brings respect.

The final lesson that I would like us to take withy us from the text this morning is that integrity of character brings respect from other people. Even Jesus’ enemies respected his integrity. They were low enough to try to use it against him. But they knew he had integrity and they didn’t have it. When other people see the genuineness of our character, the truthfulness of our speech, the consistency of our positions based on the Bible, and the straightforward way that we interact with people, they admire our integrity. They may or may not agree with us but they will admire our integrity.

Integrity is the first step to true greatness. Men love to praise, but are slow to practice it. To maintain it in high places costs self-denial; in all places it is liable to opposition, but its end is glorious, and the universe will yet do it homage. Charles Simmons <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/c/charlessim155523.html>

By the grace of God, those who see our integrity will take one more step and wonder how we came to have such a good character. Then our words and actions have a chance to recommend our Savior. As Charles Stanley put it;

The time you spend alone with God will transform your character and increase your devotion. Then your integrity and godly behavior in an unbelieving world will make others long to know the Lord. Charles Stanley <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/c/charlessta451684.html>

# Conclusion

Charles H. Spurgeon was a famous minister of the 19th century who had integrity, was greatly admired, and whose works are still read today. I found this section of Charles Surgeon’s advice to aspiring ministers quoted in a book by Charles Stanley.

Every workmen knows the necessity of keeping his tools in a good state of repair… If the workman loses his edge… He knows that there will be a greater draught upon his energies, or his work will be badly done. Michelangelo, the elect of the fine arts, understood so well the importance of his tools, that he always made his own brushes with his own hands. And in this he gives us an illustration of the God of grace, who with special care fashions for himself all true ministers.

We are, in a certain sense, our own tools, and therefore must keep ourselves in order. If I want to preach the gospel, I can only use my own voice; therefore I must train my vocal powers. I can only think with my own brain, and feel with my own heart, and therefore I must educate my intellectual and emotional faculties. I can only weep and agonize for souls with my own renewed nature, therefore must I watchfully maintain the tenderness which was in Christ Jesus. It will be in vain for me to stock my library, or organize societies, or project schemes, if I neglect the culture of myself; for books, and agencies, and systems, are only remotely the instruments of my holy calling; my own spirit, soul, and body are my nearest machinery for sacred service; my spiritual faculties, and my inner life, are my battle ax and weapons for war….

Then, quoting from a letter of the great Scottish minister, Robert Murray McCheyne, he concludes, "Remember, you are God's sword, his instrument – I trust a chosen vessel unto him to bear his name. In great measure, according to the purity and perfection of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talent God blesses so much as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God." -- Charles H Spurgeon, Lectures to my Students found in The Tale of the Tardy Ox Cart by Charles R Swindoll p. 461

Having integrity of character enables us to be powerfully used of God.