

“Making a Difference in The World”
“Living with Integrity - Why Integrity Matters”
Mark 7:14-22 preached on February 14, 2010

In 1912, when the Titanic sailed, everybody called it unsinkable. That was because the Titanic was using a new technology that divided the hull into compartments. Previously the hull was just one big space, one big room. The idea was that even if a few compartments were damaged or flooded, the ship would still be able to float. But as we all know, the Titanic sank. When the integrity of the hull was damaged, the ship was doomed. James Cameron, the producer of the latest Titanic film, said, “The Titanic is a metaphor of life. We’re all on The Titanic.” In many ways life is like a ship. For a while we smoothly sail along through still waters. We may think that we’re just cruising through life but if our integrity gets damaged, we’re going to sink. If the integrity of our life is breached, we’re headed for trouble, maybe even a major catastrophe.

Today many of us make a titanic mistake by compartmentalizing our lives and thinking that it will keep us safe. We divide our lives into little bite-size pieces. This is my Work Life, my Home Life, my Social Life, my Church Life, my Sex Life - as if all these things are totally unrelated. Even well meaning Christians often divide their lives, compartmentalize their lives. There is the spiritual compartment where we pray and thank God, go to church and maybe even do some kind of ministry. And then there is the secular life where we go to work and live in the real world, make real money and do real things. Often these compartments never interact with each other. There is no integration in life.

And that’s a Titanic mistake. It’s a tragedy. Because the reason we do this is so we can hold conflicting values in our mind. We want to behave one way, believe one thing in one place and then do and believe something quite different in another part of our life. And somehow, we try to live in the midst of the contradiction of it all. We think that by putting our life into little compartments, just like was done on the Titanic, that our life will be unsinkable. It will be OK. If one part gets flooded, if we take on a little sin, if our actions are questionable in one area, it’s not going to sink the whole ship because this part is separated from the rest of my life. But it’s a big mistake. It was a mistaken assumption on the Titanic, and it is a titanic mistake in our life as well.

According to Webster, “Integrity is the quality or state of being complete or undivided or incorruptible.” That says that we can’t compartmentalize our lives and maintain our integrity. Integrity means wholeness, unseparated, we’ve got it all together. Integrity means we can’t just say I’ve got “this” over here so I can do this over here! We like to compartmentalize our life so we can say, “Family is first in my life” but still spend all our time and money at work. We like to say, “I want to go to church and praise God” but I want to go to movies that blaspheme God. I don’t want those things to get mixed up. I want to obey God in some areas, but I want to ignore God in other areas because it’s inconvenient; it’s not what I want to do. But we can’t live with integrity if we separate the segments of our life.

How often have you heard, “What I do in my private life is my business and it has no effect on my public life.” Really? We’ve heard it from the White House, Congress, political pundits and commentators. We’ve heard it from Hollywood and throughout the entertainment business. “My private life does not affect my public behavior.” Of course it does. Just ask David Eller. David Eller had been the Chair of Religious Studies at Elizabethtown College, and an ordained pastor in the church of the Brethren. That was his public life. But in his private life, he was trying to set up a sexual relationship with a 12 year old girl. What he did in private brought his public life down big time. When his integrity was breached, his public life sank. Or ask Greg Hogan. Greg Hogan is the son of a Baptist minister. When he was 19, he was the president of the sophomore class at Lehigh University; a respected brother of Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity. That was his public life. In his private life, he gambled on line, big time. To cover his debts, he robbed a bank, and then he went back to his frat house, as though nothing changed. But his arrest changed everything, moving him from the classrooms of Lehigh to the cells of Huntingdon State Prison. His private life became very public. Or talk to Mark Furman. Remember him. He was a main witness in the OJ Simpson trial. What he did and said in public was disavowed because of what he did and said in private. If we think that whatever we do in our private life does not affect

our public behavior, what we do at church doesn't affect our work, or what we do at work doesn't affect our home or our faith, we have a titanic problem. A lack of integrity. We need integrity.

Why is integrity important? Three reasons, and the first one is.

1. INTEGRITY PLEASURES GOD.

Understand that God is absolute integrity, and when we live a life of integrity, it pleases Him. Scripture tells us that God cannot lie, that God is absolute truth. Because of that, God demands integrity in our actions, in our words, in our thoughts. Our entire life is to be filled with honesty and integrity. Proverbs 3:22 *“The Lord hates people with twisted hearts, but He delights in those who have integrity.”* God hates deception but he loves integrity. Why does he hate deception? Because that's totally opposed to who He is and what He wants. Deception devours, destroys, and distorts our hearts. It keeps us from becoming all that God has created us to be.

You know people who rationalize dishonesty with all sorts of different excuses. And chances are that there have been times, there are times when we do it ourselves. One of our favorites is, “No one will ever know so what does it matter?” I can do this little indulgence. I can take this little step of dishonesty. I can give in a little here. If it's convenient, I can ignore my principles now and then because no one will ever know. Sure I would criticize someone else for doing that, but this is my life, and my life, my situation is different. And no one will ever know.

We have some athletes here today, or people like me who used to be athletes. And often I have heard it said that it is only illegal if you get caught. That would seem to be the attitude of Barry Bonds and Raphael Palmeiro. Mark McGwire denied steroid use as a player. He knew it was a lie, and we knew it was a lie but what could be done. Now he becomes a hitting coach for the St. Louis Cardinals and he had no integrity until he confessed the truth. Even though he wasn't caught, he was still damaged. And that's not just for the pro athletes. I had a church softball coach quit because I insisted that our highest goal was not the scoreboard, but giving the best that we could, playing the best we could while playing within the rules. And the rules we were to play by were not the American Softball Association, but rules we find in scripture. For we are called to a higher standard than the world lives by. And the bottom line is that if we do something wrong, it is wrong, whether anyone notices it or not. Because we will always notice it, and our integrity will be ruptured.

No one will ever know. Well, no one except me, and God. God will know. And He's the one that we ought to care about the most. We are called to please God, not deceive God, as though that were even possible. For the scriptures tell us that *“The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the earth.”* (2 Chronicles 16:9a) He's watching every move we make. He knows every single breath we take. He knew us, he saw us as we were being formed in our mother's body. He knows our faithfulness, and our lack of it. Even if we convince ourselves that no other will ever find out about some little departures from our principles and our faith, still we must strive to do what is right, and what is righteous. We need to live with integrity because God cares; because God insists on it; and because God is watching. It pleases Him, for *“God delights in integrity.”*

2. OUR INTEGRITY AFFECTS OTHERS.

How we live our life, whether with integrity or without it, affects the people around us. Certainly it affects the people in our homes, and in our families. Proverbs 20:7 *“Good people who live honest lives will be a blessing to their children.”* Do you want to be a blessing to your children? Live with integrity. In the Living Bible that same verse says, *“It is a wonderful heritage to have an honest father.”* That says that we do our children a tremendous favor if we show them how to live with integrity. It doesn't matter what we tell them if our actions do not follow our words, our principles, our faith. In Harry Chapin's classic, “Cat's in the Cradle,” a man comes to the amazing conclusion that “my boy is just like me. He's grown up just like me.” His son is now living the same lifestyle that he had shown him, not what he had told him. If we want to give our children a

most precious gift, we must show them how to live according to our faith, to live by our principles, that they might learn to live with integrity.

Not only does our integrity affect people in our families, it affects the people around us, and it affects society in general. Proverbs 11:11, “*The influence of good people makes a city great.*” Now as a church, we work to improve the Manchester area. We are trying to make this a truly great place to live. That’s why we have the Clothing Bank, Angel Food, and Sunbeam. That’s why we host programs like Strengthening Families and Servants and so many other things. We are working to help people live and grow in faith. But the only way we can make this a great place, is to have great people stepping forward to make a difference. Proverbs 14:34 “*Doing what is right makes a nation great.*” Our country is desperate for people of integrity; people who live the way God intends for us to live.

Did you know that over the years the movie ratings have changed. The standards have eroded. For what was once considered an R rating a decade ago is now PG-13, or even PG. Actually in one case the standards have gotten tougher. When the film “Facing the Giants” came out, it was a PG rating, Parental Guidance needed, because it lifted up Christian themes. Apparently that is at least as offensive as nudity, sex, excessive violence, and horrendous language because none of those things are in this movie and yet people had to be warned about it. But over time, those eroding standards have had an affect on society, particularly in what we consider acceptable for our children. If movie standards, if our life standards can be brought down over time, they can also be brought up. They can be restored. We can strengthen the standards. But it requires us to live with integrity; to teach our children and our grand children, to teach our friends, neighbors and co-workers to live with integrity.

Our lifestyle also influences the way people view Jesus. Living with integrity helps to bring people into a relationship with God. It’s part of our witness to the world. Peter wrote, “*People who do not believe, are living all around you. So live good lives. Then they will see the good things you do and they will give glory to God.*” (1 Peter 2:12) Living with integrity helps other people find God. We know that, but we often hear it in a negative tone. For there is the consistent complaint that the church is filled with hypocrites, that we are merely actors playing the part of people who live by faith; that beyond Sunday morning we are as ethically challenged as any other person. Now partly that’s false because we aren’t filled with hypocrites. We’ve got plenty of room for more hypocrites. But it is true that we do not always live by the faith we proclaim. Our challenge is to live such a righteous life, such a life filled with integrity that no one will believe the gossip about us.

So, integrity pleases God. Living with integrity affects others. And,

3. LIVING WITH INTEGRITY BLESSES ME.

There are benefits to living with integrity. One is that life is easier. Life goes smoother, when we live with integrity. It doesn’t exempt us from problems, but it does make life easier. Proverbs 11:5-6 “*Moral character makes for smooth traveling; an evil life is a hard life. Good character is the best insurance.*” Life will go smoother, if we maintain integrity. Mark Twain said, “One of the things about integrity is you don’t have to have a long memory.” You don’t have to remember what you said to whom. If you’re lying all the time, if you talk one way with one group and another way with another group, you have to remember what you said to whom. But if we speak the truth, if we are honest with what we think and believe, it is not a problem because our message is and has been consistent. Or if we say one thing to a person’s face and something quite different behind their back, then we are merely posing; maintaining a certain posture; playing a part. But then the day comes when we forget to pose, and it’s not heaven that will break loose all over the place. Twain said that with integrity we don’t have to have a good memory because we know we’ve always told the truth.

Again, Proverbs says, “*An evil life is a hard life.*” That might be a tough line to believe because life just doesn’t seem like that. David and Jeremiah both asked God why the evil triumph while our lives are so tough. And sometimes when people do something dishonorable to protect or enrich themselves, we say they took the easy way out. So how can we say, how can we believe that an evil life is a hard life. We can believe it if we

look a little closer. We can believe it if we go into the jails and prisons and ask the inmates how easy their life has been. The fact is, all kinds of chaos, all sorts of problems come into our life every time we live according to our rules rather than God’s rules.

And what is evil anyway? “Evil” is “live” spelled backwards. Any time we don’t live according to God’s principles, any time we don’t live the way we were meant to live; any time we don’t become the person we were created to be, it is evil. And an evil life is a hard life. You wonder why life is so hard? Because there is so much evil around us, working against us. And submitting to evil’s temptations will just make life worse. It is by rejecting evil that we can be blessed. In life, *“a good character is often the best insurance.”* From time to time I have heard about various studies that prove, with real medical evidence, that people of integrity, moral people, live longer, healthier lives. It’s our best insurance policy because living with integrity reduces our stress. And stress can cause all sorts of problems.

Of course, when we live with integrity, stress still finds its way into our life. But there are other stresses that we don’t have to deal with, like incongruity. Incongruity is when what we say we value cannot be seen in the lifestyle we’re living; when we don’t live by the principles we claim to believe. If our proclaimed principles are not integrated into our life with integrity, if our words and actions are not in harmony, tremendous tension is created, and stress and fatigue come rolling in. It tears us down because in our hearts and minds we know that our life is not in harmony. We try to keep our life compartmentalized, and it causes problems. It causes stress.

Another benefit of integrity is confidence. *“People who live with integrity have a firm footing but those who follow crooked paths will slip and fall.”* When we’ve got nothing to hide, we’re not afraid of anybody. We don’t have skeletons in our closet. What you see is what you get. When we live a life of integrity, it produces enormous boldness that most people simply don’t have. Because boldness comes from character. Boldness comes from doing the right thing and saying “Check me out. This is who I am. My words and my life are coordinated. There is integrity, for I live with integrity.” It produces confidence. Our footing is sure.

Integrity is important. It pleases God. It favorably affects others. And it will bring blessings into our lives. We know it is important. But how can we live with integrity? That’s for next week. But this week, begin to examine your life. Are your words, your principles and your actions in harmony with one another? Can someone, anyone know the beliefs you proclaim by watching the way you live? Do your actions through the week match who you like to appear to be on Sunday morning? These are the questions by which the world judges both us, and the One we worship. The lives of many are in the balance, including your own. Let us live in such faithfulness, in such righteousness that no one will believe the gossip about us. Let us live so that blessings may flow. Let us have a positive affect on those around us. Let us live so that God made be pleased. And in your life may it be so. Amen.