

MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD

Living with Integrity - How to Live with Integrity
Philippians 2:12-16a preached on February 21, 2010

We are talking about how to make a difference in the world. It all starts with commitment, with the desire to do what is right and the willingness to do what is necessary. It has been said that if good people do nothing, evil will triumph. We need to make the commitment to stand up; to do something; to make a difference. So first is commitment. Second is integrity. Integrity requires that there be no difference between our public proclamations and our private actions. We are to talk, act, and live the same way if someone is watching, or if no one is watching. Integrity is important because it pleases God. It favorably affects others. And it will bring blessings into our lives. For more on that, read last week's sermon. But the more important question for today is, "How do we live with integrity?" that God might be pleased; that others might be favorably affected; that we may be blessed. How do I live a life of integrity?

1. Always Speak the Truth.

Proverbs 12:22 *"The Lord hates liars, but is pleased with those who keep their word."* Do you keep your word? Do you keep your promises? God loves people who keep their word. If we don't know how to keep our word, we're not going to have very many great relationships. Integrity is the basis of all great relationships, because without integrity, any relationship is going to fall apart. Trust and truth go together. One cannot exist without the other. If I don't tell you the truth, you won't trust me. And if you don't trust me, we don't have a relationship.

One reason there are so many divorces today is because people are marrying for the wrong reasons. They marry for sexual attraction, convenience, money, security, simply because they like someone or even because they love the person. I ask couples why they want to get married and the first answer is almost always, "Because I love him. I love her." And I ask, "So what?" What can you tell me about their character? Do they have integrity? Can you trust them in all things, with all things? All great relationships are built on integrity. Without it, they fall apart.

I want to talk a minute about adultery. Most people think that adultery is a physical act. It can be, but it doesn't have to be. In Mark 8:38 Jesus said, *"If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory"* Jesus is not talking about a physical betrayal, but a spiritual betrayal. Adultery is a violation of the vows we have made, to our spouse and to our God. When we join the church, we promise to support the church with our presence, our prayers, our gifts, and our service. When we are not in church regularly, at least three Sundays out of the month, we commit adultery against God. Sickness and employment are justifiable excuses, but hangovers and the desire to sleep late because you were out too late Saturday night, are not. When we do not give our tithe, 10% is the biblical minimum; we are committing adultery against God. Some excuses are acceptable, but many are not.

Adultery is saying that we lied when we made those vows. In our marriage vows we promise to share our life, good and bad, with one another. If we withhold part of ourselves, if we do not share our emotional and spiritual selves with our spouse, we are just as guilty of adultery as if we entered into a physical relationship with another. Because we vowed that we would share our life wholly and completely, and we have not. It is an admission that we will not live by the vows we have made; that we have lied. There is limited truth to what we say, so there is no truth.

Relationships are breaking because trust is missing. How do we restore them? How do we rebuild them? From the Amplified Bible, Ephesians 4:15 *"Let our lives lovingly express the truth in all things speaking truly, dealing truly, living truly."* We begin to speak the truth in our relationships. That means we say what we really feel. We don't hide or suppress any issue. Nothing is off the table. And that means that in our homes and in our churches, in all our relationships, we purposely go through a tunnel of chaos to hit the

hard issues and to stay in there when every ounce of the body says get up and walk out. What is the tunnel of chaos? That is the place where we tear away all pretenses, and all excuses, about ourselves and about those around us. That is the place where we face the truth; where we speak the truth; where we hear the truth; where we deal with the truth, even when it hurts. That is the place where we begin to live in truth, and with truth. And if we come out of the other side of that dark tunnel, trust and integrity will return.

Now when we deal with truth, we do it lovingly. Truth is to be shared, not wielded like a club. We do not use truth to destroy people. We don't use truth to prove we're right and they're wrong, although my wife and children might say that I don't always play by those rules. But truth is to be lovingly expressed, because truth must be used to set one another free. The truth can and will set us free. If we want freedom in our marriage, in our career, in our church, in any aspect of our life, we must tell the truth, always.

"Don't talk out of both sides of your mouth. Avoid careless banter, white lies, and gossip." (Proverbs 4:24) These are things that a person of integrity does not do. No gossip. No lies, white or otherwise. Avoid careless banter. And don't talk out of both sides of the mouth. That is, don't say one thing to one person, and something else to someone else. That is the definition of a hypocrite. And we can't be hypocritical and maintain our integrity.

2. Stand up for What Is Right.

Standing up is more than speaking up. It often involves action. Sometimes integrity demands that we take action. 2 Corinthians 13:8 *"Our responsibility is never to oppose the truth but to stand for the truth at all times."* Stand for the truth at all times. There aren't many today who are interested in standing for the truth. They stand for their rights. Our nation is obsessed with rights. Often a little short on responsibility but strong on rights. And everyday the courts are inventing new rights that we didn't even know we had or needed. A couple of summers ago, the Rev. Al Sharpton declared that we have a right to air conditioning. I never knew that. But it just shows that people are very interested in their rights.

Has it ever occurred to anybody that wherever there are rights there also must be wrongs? Yet no one dares raise that possibility today. We can't talk about wrongs because that tramples on my right to do whatever I want to do, even if you think my right is ethically, morally, or legally wrong. It's strange that we can't talk about morality because of rights, and yet rights are grounded in morality. Our rights reflect our morality. And if we have rights, we also have wrongs. We have many people who are willing to speak up about their rights but very few people are willing to say, "This is wrong. This is wrong in our society. It is wrong for our society." Even Christians get embarrassed and reticent. We worry that we will be accused of being narrow minded and judgmental. That we will be labeled ignorant bigots. So we hold our tongue. But if we are going to be people of integrity, grounded in integrity, there will be times when we have to stand up, speak the truth, and declare that some things are flat out wrong.

We don't say it in a mean spirited way. We don't speak out of hatred. We don't have to say it in anger. We speak the truth in love. If we are going to be people of integrity, there will be times in life when we will have to say to someone, or to many someones, that what is happening, what they're planning or doing is wrong. Sex outside of marriage is always wrong. Abortion and divorce are wrong. At times they may be necessary, but they are still wrong. Profanity and pornography are wrong. Homosexuality is wrong, not based on what I think, but on what God, the Creator, the Redeemer, the Judge says in the Old Testament and the New Testament. That does not mean that all homosexuals are condemned. There is grace for all. And it is God and God alone who will judge their heart. If I judge others without knowing their heart, I might as well condemn myself, for I have done things that are both wrong and stupid. And so have you. Integrity demands that we have one set of rules for all. And integrity demands that we stand up for what is right. For *"When a person knows the right thing to do but doesn't do it, then he is sinning."* (James 4:17)

In Proverbs it says that sound leadership is founded on loving integrity. If we want to be a leader in our home, our community, our work, wherever, we have to have “*loving integrity*.” We speak the truth in love. It’s not always the popular thing to do, but it’s what a leader must do. Leadership and popularity are not the same thing. We can be popular just by sacrificing our integrity and giving people whatever they want, no matter what they want. We can be popular just by telling people what they want to hear. That is the biggest problem with politicians today. They will tell people whatever they want to hear so they can be popular. But they are not leaders because they will not speak the truth, and they do not do what needs to be done. Leaders must do what is right, and people will follow them because they trust them. And trust requires integrity. Leadership requires the loving integrity to consistently do the right thing because it is the right thing. We stand up for what is right.

3. Stay Clean.

Keep your mind and your body clean. Keep your motives pure. Philippians 2:15 “*You’re to live clean, innocent lives as children of God in a dark world full of crooked and perverse people. Let your lives shine brightly before them.*” Stay clean. But how do we stay clean? How do we have integrity when everybody around us is cutting corners, looking for the quick score, when character has been forgotten until the next election rolls around. How do we maintain our integrity? Three things:

A. Choose the Right Kind of Friends. We become like the people we spend the most time with, so seek out people of integrity. And seek Jesus. Spend more time with Him in prayer and scripture. We become more like Him by spending more time with Him. 1 Corinthians 15:33 “*Bad company corrupts good character.*” In other words, if we want to soar with eagles, we can’t run with turkeys. Choose friends wisely because people are either going to pull us up or pull us down. And gravity makes it easier to pull down than to pull up. So choose friends wisely.

B. Value Integrity More than Image. That’s tough in a world where image is everything. It doesn’t matter if you’re successful as long as you look successful. It doesn’t matter if you’re rich as long as you appear to be rich. It’s all about image not substance. There’s a bumper sticker that says “Life never looked so great.” It could say, “Life is great.” But it doesn’t. It says Life never looked so great because it doesn’t matter if life is great as long as it looks great. I don’t have to have fun as long as it looks like I’m having fun. You can see the personification of that in the bars and wherever people gather to do drugs. There you will find miserable people trying to convince themselves and others that they are having fun because they look like they’re having fun. Image over substance does not work.

Alvin Toffler said, “Our greatest pretenses are built up not to hide our evil but to hide our emptiness.” Think about that. Often we wear masks to hide our insecurities; our feelings of inferiority; our emptiness. We hide the places that God wants to fill with His presence. Places that still need to be filled. We put on our masks to hide the emptiness, but people of integrity don’t wear masks.

Proverbs 28:6 “*It’s better to be a poor person who has integrity, than to be rich and double dealing.*” Fewer things will destroy integrity faster than greed, for love of money is the root of evil. Do you remember the movie Wall Street? The tag line from that movie that most people remember is, “Greed is good!” And most of the characters were willing to do anything to satisfy their desire for more and more. So we have to decide, what is more important to me? Truth or things. If we decide that truth is more important, sometimes we will give up things in order to tell the truth. If things become more important than truth, we will lie to make a profit. We will cheat on our taxes. We will misuse company resources. If things are more important than truth, if our image is more important than our character, more than our righteousness, then we have no integrity. Watch your integrity more than your image.

C. Watch What You Watch. Filter what you allow to come into your mind. If we’re going to be people of integrity, we have to monitor our media intake because there are all sorts of things out there that do not

represent integrity in any way. We just can't allow any idea, any thought, any movie, any book, any magazine to come into our mind. Computer programmers say, "Garbage in, garbage out." If we allow that garbage to come into our life, there will be all sorts of garbage filling and spilling out of our life. We have to watch what we watch. Psalm 101:2-3 "*I will lead a life of integrity in my own home. I will refuse to look at anything vile and vulgar.*" Put that on the TV because there are some things that we just cannot watch and maintain our integrity.

Proverbs 15:14 "*The wise person is hungry for the truth but the fool feeds on trash.*" There is a lot of trash out there. It's foolish to think we can fill our minds with trash and then live a life of integrity. Inevitably it's going to affect our behavior. I know the excuses. I've heard them. I've uttered them. "There's some good stuff here and I just skip over the other part. It's just fiction anyway, no big deal." How many times do we justify our sins because they're "no big deal"? Have you ever used that excuse? Rationalizing in your mind? Overruling what your heart knows is wrong? It's no big deal. But how big a hole does it take to sink a ship? No matter the size of the boat, no matter the size of the hole, if it stays there, that ship's going down. It's not a matter of if but when. And just a small sin, a small indulgence will eventually sink our life.

Here's the bottom line. If we want to be people of integrity, we have to take care of the small things. We have to care about the things in our private life that nobody sees. We have to care about details that really are important. They may seem to be inconsequential, but if we are going to have integrity, we have to care about them. Integrity is who we are when nobody's looking. Integrity is who we are in the dark. That's character. That's integrity.

Our challenge today is to make the commitment to be people of integrity in the midst of a dark, crooked, perverse world. With integrity, we can shine hope and grace on those cowering in darkness and despair. Our country, our community, our churches are desperately in need of people of integrity. They cry out for integrity. Without them, foundations will crumble. Do we want to please God? Do we want to positively influence others? Do we want to make a difference with our life? Do we want God's blessings in our life? Then we must become people of integrity.

These are the steps. They're simple but they're not easy. Integrity must be learned. It must be practiced. It doesn't come overnight. It is practiced over time. Sometimes we're going to get tired. Sometimes our knees will be weak and wobbly; spiritually, emotionally, morally. We will be tempted to give up and give in. Where do we get the strength to do the right thing when it seems that all the others are doing the wrong thing? Where do we get the strength to swim upstream when the pollution is coming downstream? Where does that power come from?

"God's divine power gives us everything we need for life and godliness. This power was given to us through knowing Jesus, who called us by His own glory and integrity." (2 Peter 1:3) No one ever lived a more integrated life than Jesus Christ because He was, and He is God in human form. No one ever lived a greater life of integrity. If we want to live a life of integrity, Jesus Christ must live in our hearts, in our minds, and in our souls. Daily we must open our hearts and say, "Jesus, come into my heart today. Clear out all the garbage. Clean house. And let us start again that I might be the person you want me to be; that I might be a person of integrity." And in your life may it be so. Amen.