

IS YOUR INTEGRITY SHOWING?

2 Corinthians 1:12–22

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The title of the message is this: “Is Your Integrity Showing?” When you read today’s passage of Scripture, you’ll understand what the problem was. There was an accusation against him. Very simply, the accusation went something like this, “If you cannot trust him to keep his appointments, how can you trust him with anything?” Paul had evidently let a remark drop that he had intended to visit them. Time had gone by, and he had been unable to visit. More than that, not only was he unable, but he chose not to visit them, according to verse 23, in order to spare them. There had been a lot of resistance against his authority at the church of Corinth. He had sent them a severe letter and had already paid them a painful visit (2 Corinthians 2:2; 7:8). He wanted to give them time to work things out so that his next visit to them could be without that kind of pain or severity.

So even though he had said he would come, he had not—his critics at Corinth were saying, using it as a pretext. Isn’t it often the case, when somebody has something against us, they may not say what the real thing is, but they will invent a pretext to come at us with? That’s the pretext—Paul doesn’t keep his appointments. When he says yes, he may mean no. When he says no, he may mean yes.

Paul, though, had conditioned all travel plans by the will of God, we know this from Romans 1 as well as 1 Corinthians 16:7. He had said to them in 1 Corinthians 16:7, “I will come to you, if God wills,” or “I will come to you if God permits.” God had not permitted, and it’s well that we condition our prayers too—“If the Lord wills.”

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How difficult it is, seemingly, for people to keep simple commitments. I'm amazed that, even among the clergy, you see a lack of courtesy and ethics that are needed on the part of every Christian. Jesus says, "Let your 'yes' be 'yes' and your 'no' be 'no'" (Matthew 5:37). To commit yourself verbally to something and then not follow through is the charge against Paul—"Paul, you committed yourself and you didn't follow through." The real issue boils down to one of integrity. That's, of course, what I'm talking about in this whole message today—integrity. Are you really what you say you are?

The word "integrity" is a Latin word, a combination of two parts—"integrity" literally means "not to touch." It describes something untouched; something that is a whole, unbroken, untarnished, undivided. Something that has not been taken away from or broken into pieces. The word "integrity" is related to the numerical concept of "integer." An integer is a whole number, a number that cannot be divided, fractionalized, decimalized or square-rooted. It's a whole number. If you take anything away from it, it ceases to be an integer. So integrity describes a person who, in kids' language, "has it all together." They're not a piece here, a piece there. But they're all together. And what you see is what you get.

Paul had to defend his integrity at Corinth, because the issue underneath the charge was "if we can't trust him to keep his appointments, then maybe we shouldn't trust him regarding his radical doctrine of justification by faith, salvation through grace."

Paul uses the word, in verse 12, to defend his integrity, his wholeness, by saying that he had conducted himself in their presence with all "holiness and sincerity" (NIV). The word for "sincerity" there is related to the word "integrity"; it literally means "to judge by the sun." It's to hold something up in the light of the sun, to see if there's anything imperfect in it. In ordinary light, it might look ok, but what does it look like underneath the sun's light? "I've conducted

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myself before you as if judged by the sun. There is nothing there that isn't pure." Blessed is the person who has nothing to hide. Whose private life is not different from their public life. That's the issue here in integrity. Are you what you say you are?

How do we apply this to our lives? There are three questions I want us to ask ourselves:

I. What do we do about those who really disappoint us in the ministry?

Paul himself was filled with integrity, but there are those who are in places, perhaps of teaching or administrative leadership in the body of Christ, whom—you know and I know—are not at all in private life what they are in public life. Finances, morals, doctrine—you name it. How do we treat such persons and such issues in our life? How do we deal with the disappointments when someone we have looked to does not have the integrity, the wholeness we thought they did?

The Corinthian critics were willing to wash everybody out and use that in a cynical way to gain advantage for false teachers by saying, "You can't trust anyone!"

I'm reminded how the Early Church faced this issue. In the third and fourth century, there arose two movements. There had been great persecution of the church, and sometimes bishops handed over written copies of Scripture on the penalty that, if they didn't, they'd be put to death. So they surrendered up the Scriptures. And other Christians betrayed the faith under penalty of death.

Later, when the persecution lifted, some of these bishops wanted to be reinstated to their positions. Some of the Christians wanted to be readmitted to membership in the church. The church took a position that I think is biblical. In fact, one of the things that was said was that, if a bishop later fell and he had given you water baptism or a sacrament of some kind, that baptism or sacrament was not valid. The church rightly, in a church council, decided that it wasn't the person who made the act of sacrament valid. It was the faith of the recipient and the work of God's grace. It was not the person that baptizes me. It is not on their character that my baptism is

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valid. It is upon the faith that is in me, when I am baptized in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.

That's helped me enormously to get an historical picture on some of the things I've wrestled with personally in terms of disappointments I've had in leadership positions who have failed to have the kind of integrity I'd have liked to have seen. God's grace has nevertheless done its work in my life.

What about those who disappoint us in the ministry? Pray for them. But whatever you do, go on. Forgetting the things which are behind, looking forward to the author and perfecter of our faith, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 12:2). It will not do us any good in life to get stuck with a hurt.

Which brings us to the second question, which applies the issue of integrity to ourselves.

II. Are we going to let negative attitudes control the rest of our life?

Sometimes when we've had a disdainful experience, we can become jaundiced. Many persons started out following Christ and somebody disappointed them. It may be another Christian. It may be a leader in the church, and you've said, "I'll never set foot in a church door again. If that's what being a Christian is, forget it. I saw one or two examples and maybe failed to look around and see the other ninety-nine people who really authentically and honestly live what it means to be a Christian." But on the basis of one disappointment, they've turned away and said, "I'll never give my life to Christ."

How do you deal with disappointment like that? By making a distinction between the subjective witness of a person and the objective reality of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is true, though everyone be a Judas. Jesus Christ is true, though everyone be a Peter and deny Him three times or more.

The reality of the Christian faith is rooted in the reality of Jesus the Lord. Christ, who has died

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for our sins and has risen again from the dead—that’s where my faith is planted and where your faith must be planted. There is too much good in Christ and in His church to reckon with the bad.

One of the people who’ve had a great spiritual impact on my life is Dr. J. Robert Ashcroft, formerly the president of Evangel College, when I was a student. Knowing I have an ability to kind of be critical, he said to me one time, when I was in a real critical mood, he handed me a little piece of paper on which was written these prophetic words, “Let God use you for the creative and constructive, above the critical and corrective.” He said, “That’s an important point. I’m not saying, ‘Don’t be critical.’ I’m not saying, ‘Don’t be corrective.’ Just be creative and constructive more than you are critical and corrective.”

God, help us to be balanced in our life. We can spend so much time seeing what’s wrong with everybody and fail to see what’s right. And fail to think about those things which are pure and honest and beautiful and worthy of good report.

III. The third application of integrity is: What about our own integrity as people, as individual persons?

Is there coherence between our inner and outer lives? Between what we are in private and what we are in public? Between what we are at work and what we are at church? Between our words and our deeds?

Integrity—stewardship is an area of integrity. When we call Jesus “Lord,” this means He’s Lord of our time, Lord of our finances. When we say that we are His disciples, it means we live under a discipline in the area of stewardship in our life. Are we really coherent? Are we together? Are we merely saying, “Lord, Lord,” or are we, in a real way, demonstrating in our living that Jesus is “Lord, Lord”? In the area of forgiveness, we speak of God being the forgiver—are we also forgiving? Or do we carry in ourselves old grudges and nurse old hurts and continue to rehash

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them and rehash them until we have used them so many times they have become a deep burr—going deeper and deeper into our stem? Or do we come to wholeness in integrity by being forgiving and by letting our actions be consistent with our beliefs?

What about the vows that we make? The commitments that we make. How easy it is to say “We’re going to do something” and when we say it, we’re just doing it to get off the hook. We don’t want to be bugged by somebody. Commitments, vows, “I’ll do this.”

Secret sin. What about secret sin? Is there part of us that is all alone, by itself, not the whole but the part? David said, “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’—and you forgave the guilt of my sin” (Psalm 32:3–5, NIV). David wanted to come back to integrity. He didn’t deny the fact that he had been split apart. That sin had split him apart from God. “Lord, You will forgive,” and the Lord did forgive and restore him to integrity. We ought to be willing to do the same. To see that of ourselves. That God does restore and God does forgive.

When there’s part of me that dwells in secret sin, I am not the whole that God is seeking to make. Integrity.

The wonderful thing about the Scripture, when it talks to us about this kind of area, is that integrity is not simply something we do all on our own. But integrity is something that God gives us as a gift of grace. He makes us whole, complete, sound, integrated, together.

In fact, this passage—verses 21 to 22—closes with Paul’s giving us the four specific actions that God takes toward us, to give us wholeness in our life, to make us complete. I’m so glad he puts the emphasis there. Because if I left the service having heard about my responsibility without

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hearing about what God does for me, I would leave very discouraged. There's always this balance—"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and do His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12–13). God is working, I am working. There's this cooperation.

What is God doing for us? Paul says that God's specifically doing four things for us to cause us to come to a position of wholeness.

A. One, God is making us to stand firm in Christ. "He establishes us," Paul says (Romans 16:25), in fact, every promise of God is fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus is the "yes" to every promise God has made. What Paul does is take this little accusation that is made against him and turn it into a great teaching lesson. He says, "I'm no more insincere than God, because my whole life is modeled after the character of God." God doesn't say "Yes, yes," and "No, no." He says "Yes, His promises are 'Yes' in Christ" (see 2 Corinthians 1:20). Has God the Father promised to be the one true God? Yes. How do we know? Because Jesus came. Has God promised that He is the one who loves us and will always love us and will never leave us nor forsake us? Yes. So how do we know that promise is true? Because of Jesus. Has God promised us an eternal inheritance with Him? How do we know He's going to keep His Word? Because of Jesus. All of God's promises find their yes in Christ.

Paul is saying to us, by the Spirit, that He is the same God who makes us stand firm in Christ.

The verb is in the present tense, meaning that the action is continuous. He is causing us to continually stand firmer and firmer in our faith in Christ. Our experience is progressive. Many times, God is doing this for us and we're not even aware of it.

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How many times God has looked at us with love and with intercession, through Christ Jesus our Lord, and has done something very precious for us and we were not even aware of it? God has helped us. He is causing us to stand firm in Christ.

B. Another beautiful thing that God has done for us is that He has anointed us. He did this when we came to faith in Christ. He anointed us—that is, He gave us the Spirit. In the Old Testament, only two things were anointed. That is, sacred objects and people. People that were anointed included prophets, priests, and kings. When they assumed their ministry of being a prophet, a priest, or a king, they were anointed, symbolizing that the Spirit was upon them to function in the office they were called to.

In the New Testament, in Luke 4, Jesus says that He has this anointing, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me” (Luke 4:18). He is anointed to be, not in a physical sense. There was not a physical anointing with oil, but a spiritual anointing, by the Spirit resting upon Him. He was anointed to be a prophet, one who spoke on behalf of God, because He saw God; one who is a priest, because He intercedes between God and man; and one who is king, that is, one who rules.

When we become a Christian, more happens to us than what we’re aware of at that particular moment. At that moment, as the Spirit of God comes into our life, Scripture says we are anointed. We’re anointed ourselves to follow in those functions of Christ—to be a prophet, one who sees the things of God. “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard what has been revealed to those who love God” (1 Corinthians 2:9). It’s been revealed to us. We’re able to see into God and into God’s ways because we have the anointing of the Spirit. We’re able to be anointed to be priests and need no intercessor other than Jesus, because we ourselves are intercessors. We have a right to approach the Lord on our own. We’re anointed to be kings because sin will not have dominion

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over us, and because we have been given an opportunity to rule and to reign with Him forever and ever. All of that was incipient in conversion. That was your anointing.

I might add that there are many ways the Spirit replenishes that anointing as we go through our Christian life. It's not simply a once-and-for-all thing, but it's a once-and-continually thing, as we walk with the Lord. Fresh anointing.

C. He set His seal of ownership upon us, Paul says, which is the third thing God does to establish us in our integrity. When a person in the old days put a seal on a letter, there was wax waiting for an impression. They took their seal and impressed it. Meaning two things. That was a mark of authenticity. And it was a mark of ownership. So the Lord knows those who are His. He sealed us. We're authentically His. We're secure in His hands. The Lord knows them that are His because they have His seal upon them. The stamp of His character. The stamp of His approval. The stamp of His security.

D. The Lord has done a fourth thing for us. He has given us the Spirit as a deposit.

The word in the Greek is a real estate word: "earnest money." Perhaps another way to describe it is if you're buying something on time, the deposit is the first installment. But it's more than the first installment. It is actually the guarantee of all that is coming. When you make the installment—we're talking about the concept where the person has the money but they simply get in a real firm escrow from which there is no escape. They give an initial deposit, signifying that when the day comes for the ownership to be consummated, the full money will be there. It's a guarantee. A guaranteed deposit. But the person who makes it has all the assets to back it up. So we are told that the Spirit of God, whom we have dwelling in us, who comes to us in many different ways through our Christian experience, is given to us as a down payment, guaranteeing the future endowment that is ours. All that God has for us in the ages to come is going to come to

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pass. The gift of the Spirit, and all the gifts of the Spirit as we know them now, are small compared to the size of the endowment that we have that is coming to us in Christ Jesus. Already the Spirit is the guarantee in your life. The Spirit which in us causes us to say, “Abba, Father.” Some of you are tortured with ideas of whether or not you are a Christian. You’ve done everything you know to do. You’ve confessed faith in the Lord. You stood on His words. But yet, you have doubts—“Am I really a Christian?”

Let me tell you how to know you’re a Christian. Is there not something in you that keeps saying, “But I’ve done what I was supposed to do from the Scripture! I believed in my heart. I’ve confessed with my lips that Jesus Christ is God’s Son. Am I not, therefore, God’s son or daughter?” Do you know who’s telling you that? Do you know who’s putting that in your mind? That’s the Spirit. The Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are God’s children. When that comes to you, it is not your own imagination. That is God’s Spirit bearing witness with your heart that you are God’s child. That is God’s down payment, guarantee, that all the wealth and riches of God, which He has promised to you, are in God’s day going to come to pass. He has promised to present us on that day with integrity, without blemish. No part of us lacking, all that we can be—complete.

What has the Lord said to you and to your heart in these moments? Has He talked to you about your feelings regarding the integrity of others? Especially, maybe, some in leadership positions in the body? Has He talked to you about your own integrity? Have you received encouragement about what God is doing in your life through grace? I pray that, if the Lord has put His finger upon some area of your life which needs to come out of hiding and needs to come into the clear light of confession and redemption, that simultaneous with that He will also give you—as He surely will—His encouragement. It is God who makes us stand.

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Closing Prayer

Our Father, we thank You for these moments we have had together in worship and in Your Word. For some today, this message has come as a special delivery letter from You. Because for some, there are particular struggles. It may be, Lord, that there is someone in this audience who at one time walked with You in their life, but because of the bad example of some believer, fell away from You and they find themselves anew in this service today hearing Your Word, being called by Your love and by Your Spirit. I pray that, in this moment, their heart's doors would swing open to You, and that You, in whom there is no fault or shadow of turning, whose answers are always yes toward us, will come in and reign. And that You'll restore that relationship. I pray for others, Lord, who realize now that the Word of God has been shared, that there is indeed a difference between their public life and their private life. Between what their family may know and what they themselves may know. Lord, You are the one who seeks to mend us when we are torn, who seeks to bring us to wholeness when we are fragmented. Take the pieces which represent the separate parts of our life and bring them together and bond them into one whole. Forgiving sin where sin has been committed. Forgiving attitudes where attitudes are wrong. Would You bring a whole new thing to pass? A beautiful new start, a cleansing, a restoration, a wholeness. We pray for Your church here and Your church at large—that righteousness would characterize the entire behavior of the people of God. That Your church would be the glistening, beautiful bride that You have designed her to be. We know that it is Your desire to present us without fault on that day. We pray, Lord, that some of that future commendation will be moved into the present—that we may be seen as without fault. And in those areas where there is fault, we will see cleansed and covered by Your grace. It's our desire, Lord, to be Your people, to walk in Your steps, to know You and Your ways. Bless us, Lord, as

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we gather for some moments of prayer now. May Your Spirit be here to vitalize lives, to heal both body and spirit. We ask, in the name of Jesus. Amen.