

Christian Integrity

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There once was a mighty warrior in David's army named Uriah the Hittite. While he was away fighting for Israel, David seduced his wife, Bathsheba. When David heard she was with child he called Uriah back home with the intention that Uriah would sleep with his wife and thereby think the child was his. But Uriah refused even to enter his home. When David asked him why, Uriah responded, "The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my master Joab and my lord's men are camped in the open fields. How could I go to my house and eat and drink and lie with my wife? As surely as you live, I will not do such a thing!" (2 Sam 11:11 NIV) Upon hearing this David even got Uriah drunk, but he still refused to enter his own home. And we all know how this story ends. David arranges for Uriah's death!

What integrity Uriah had! He was absolutely unyielding doing what he thought to be right. And Uriah's integrity is demonstrated in vivid contrast with David's obvious lack of integrity in this instance. I know of no one who can read this account and not have great admiration for Uriah and his incredible integrity!

Integrity Demonstrated

But men are not the only ones who honor integrity. We know from Scripture that God also esteems integrity. Note David's prayer, "I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity." (1 Chr 29:17 NIV)

Certainly Uriah is not the only Bible character who was very aware of and concerned with personal integrity. Job chided his friends, "Relent, do not be unjust; reconsider, for my integrity is at stake." (Job 6:29 NIV) Even Job's wife tried to get him to abandon his integrity. She said, "Are you still holding to your integrity? Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9 NIV)

Luke wrote, speaking of Zechariah and Elizabeth, soon to be the parents of John the Baptist, "Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly." (Lk 1:6 NIV)

Down through the pages of church history we also find accounts of men and women who gave their lives rather than sacrifice their integrity. In 1521 Martin Luther faced excommunication, public humiliation, and possible imprisonment for the stand he took against the errors of the Roman Church. His superiors, in plain biblical error, demanded that Luther recant. He replied, "I cannot recant. Here I stand."

Integrity Defined

Since integrity is so precious to God, let us carefully examine the definition of integrity. Webster's dictionary defines it as "the quality or state of being of sound moral principle; uprightness, honesty and sincerity."¹ Since the word "moral" is important to understanding the meaning of integrity, let's also define moral. Webster's defines it as, "1. Relating to, dealing with, or capable of making the distinction between right and wrong in conduct; 2. In accordance with the principles of right and wrong. 3. Good or right in the conduct of character. . . ."²

The word for integrity in the Old Testament is the Hebrew

word *t_m*. In addition to the English word, "integrity," other translation words used for *t_m* are "simpli-city," "soundness," "completeness," "upright," and "perfection." Its plural form, *tumm_m*, was one of the words on the breastplate of the High Priest. God obviously holds integrity very dear since He had the word inscribed on the breastplate of the High Priest.

The Greek word for "integrity" (*aletheia*) appears frequently in the New Testament but is most often translated as "truth." For example, the King James Bible translated *aletheia* as integrity while the NIV does so only twice (See Mat 22:16 and Mk 12:14.)

Thus, in the whole of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, we see integrity as a valid, desirable character trait. From God's perspective, certainly one who has integrity must be of sound moral principle, upright, honest, and sincere in conduct.

But these concepts or definitions are not quite encompassing enough for the integrity God calls upon His people to have. Why? Because God also requires that we be pure in heart! God, through Scripture, extends the definition of integrity beyond **conduct** to the **thoughts of the heart**. Look again at what David said above, "I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity." (1 Chr 29:17 NIV) God looks into man's heart and knows that ". . . as he thinketh in his heart, so is he. . ." (Pro 23:6 KJV)

The World and Integrity

Many Christians become disillusioned with the lack of integrity in today's world. The general attitude of the world has little room for integrity. Our culture says, "The end justifies the means." In other words, "Do or say what it takes to get what you want." Indeed, often the unscrupulous come out on top while those with integrity end up at the bottom.

But remember, both Peter and the writer of Hebrews tell us that we Christians are not of this world. We are "aliens and strangers" in it. Thus, Christian integrity does not permit us to follow the world's way of "do or say what it takes to get what you want." To the contrary, the Bible requires us to apply integrity in every aspect of our lives regardless of the apparent or world's consequences.

Even though it goes against today's culture, let's look at the benefits of walking in integrity.

The Benefits of Integrity

First, let's understand that since we are not of this world, neither are the benefits which flow from our walking in godly integrity. The benefits are stated for us in Psalm 24.

Who may ascend to the hill of the Lord?

Who may stand in his holy place?

He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to an idol
or swear by what is false.

He will receive blessing from the Lord
and vindication from God his Savior. (24:3-5 NIV)

David's Questions

One of the key words in this text is in verse three. It is **hill**. The word "hill" has a biblical/military meaning of "a place of advantage or power." An army that occupies a high hill has the fighting advantage over all the surrounding land. So when David, a military man, used the term "hill of the Lord" he was conveying the idea of sharing in God's power. In this context, let's look again at David's question: Who may ascend the hill of the Lord (to share in God's power)?

David's second question is, "Who may stand in his **holy place**?" The two words, "holy place," also have significant meaning. A place is "holy" because God is there. His presence, His glory, His splendor and all that accompany Him are there. So David's second question in plain language is, "Who may stand in His presence?" I submit that God would answer David's two questions by saying that it is those with integrity who enter into my power and my presence. This benefit alone is worth living a holy and integrity filled life.

The book of Proverbs adds other dimensions to the benefits of walking in God's integrity.

"The man of integrity walks securely. . . ." (Pro 10:9 NIV)

"The integrity of the upright guides them. . . ." (Pro 11:3 NIV)

"Righteousness guards the man of integrity. . . ." (Pro 13:6 NIV)

Thus, we see that the benefits of the walk of integrity are beyond compare. One who walks in integrity has power with God, abides in His presence, walks securely with Him, receives guidance from Him, and is guarded by righteousness! These benefits far exceed anything the world has to offer. In fact, it is these benefits which enable the Christian to overcome the world!

How Do We Get Integrity?

Now that we have seen how desirable and beneficial integrity with God is, let's ask the question, "How do we get integrity?" It is not something we inherit from our parents or receive at birth.

To answer the "how" question, let's continue to examine David's Twenty Fourth Psalm. Verse four states:

He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to an idol
or swear by what is false. (v4 NIV)

1. He Who Has Clean Hands

The phrase "clean hands" as used here does not speak simply of the state of dirt on a person's hands. Here "clean hands" speaks of the purity of deeds. It also speaks of what a person does not do.

It is interesting to note that the doctrine of clean hands is still used in Western law today. When a plaintiff goes into a court of equity and asks the judge to do something on his behalf, the judge has the right to examine that plaintiff's own conduct in the matter. The plaintiff must be free of any guilty or

contributing acts if he is to win over the defendant. This is referred to as the "clean hands" doctrine. In other words, the plaintiff must have clean hands to pre-vail.

Thus, we see this clean hands requirement both in the Bible and in secular law. In the Biblical sense of these words, clean hands speaks volumes about the person. It encompasses his entire being. It means he does not indulge in the sins of the flesh. It says he does no harm to his neighbor and that he does what is right toward others. This means he does not murder, rape or act with any sexual immorality; he does not lie, cheat, steal, slander, and so on. It also means that he does not yield his physical being to consistent sin as a lifestyle with such things as drug or alcohol abuse.

Please note that I am not saying one must be sinless. We all sin from time to time. I am speaking here of sin so consistently committed that it becomes a lifestyle. It becomes a habit. Once sin reaches this stage the guilty person often no longer even feels convicted or remorseful. On the contrary, he or she now rather justifies his sinful deeds. This kind of sin is to be avoided at all costs. This person does not have clean hands in the Biblical sense.

2. He Who Has . . . A Pure Heart

The phrase "a pure heart" as David used it in this psalm speaks of what a person thinks. It is directed at one's inward thoughts. Remember Jesus' words when he first saw Nathaniel? He said, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." (Jn 1:47 NIV)

When Jesus saw Nathaniel, He knew that Nathaniel had a pure thought life. From this Scripture (and many others) we understand that God knows our every thought. It is my desire that one day Jesus may look at me and say, "Here is a true Christian, in whom there is nothing false." But I confess that I am not there yet! There are times when suddenly I become conscious of where my thoughts are and it embarrasses me to know that Jesus is also aware of them.

These thoughts are usually the result of our old Adamic or fallen nature. They are the product of the unregenerate mind. Remember, sanctification is a process, and a very long one!

However, I also know that demons can shoot thoughts or "fiery darts" into our mind. These thoughts can be vile, evil, lustful, wicked, etc. When thoughts are sent into our minds by a demon, in themselves they are not sin. What we do with them determines whether or not we sin. If we dwell on them, add to them, and continue to develop them in our mind, then we are sinning.

But whether our impure thoughts come from our own fallen nature or from a demon, they are in either case, not pleasing to God. As soon as we become aware of them, we must reject them and put them out of our mind. By exercising this mental discipline hundreds or thousands of times, we develop the godly integrity of a pure heart.

Why is God so concerned with our thought life? Because God knows that thoughts proceed action. So, to act with integrity, one must think with integrity. Here is a proverb that says it all in one sentence:

As water reflects a face, so a man's heart reflects the man.
(Pro 27:9 NIV)

3. [He] Who Does Not Lift Up His Soul To An Idol

Few in today's Christian world have physical images or idols to which they bow down and worship. So when we see statements in Scripture about idol worship we are likely to picture Buddhists, Hindus or people of some other idol based religion. But let's closely examine Scripture from God's viewpoint concerning idols and idolatry.

God's view of idolatry is reflected in Moses' writing of the commandment:

"You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God . . ." (Exo 20:3-5 NIV)

For pagans in Moses' time, these gods were "specialized." For example, there was a god of rain, a god of mountains, a god of fire, and so forth. Every pagan family had gods they worshipped.

Through the instruction and memorization of Scripture the Israelites taught their children God's laws. Among the first Scripture a Hebrew child learned was, "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God is one LORD" (De 6:4 KJV) and, "You shall have no other gods before me." (Exo 20:3 NIV) The idea was and continues to be crystal clear. God wants His children to know that He and He alone is God. None other and/or nothing else is to come between God and His people.

How then do today's Christians violate this commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me"? It's because this commandment springs from another, more specific commandment found in Deuteronomy that says, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." (Deu 6:5 NIV)

Jesus Himself reaffirmed this commandment one day when a Pharisee challenged him. One of them asked Him, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment." (Mat 22:36-38 NIV)

Therefore, foremost to every Christian is God's command to love Him with all our heart, soul and mind. Now let's ask the question again, "Do we have idols in our lives?" Are there other "things" we love as much as God, or maybe even more than God? These things can be houses, jobs, the esteem of others, a certain person, or even a ministry position! Or, on a more base level, food, sexual gratification, entertainment, and/or recreation can be idols to Christians.

I submit that **anything** placed above or equal to God is an idol! So, when we ask the question, "Do I worship idols?," only we can answer this question in our own hearts. Let us all resolve to "Love the Lord [our] God with all [our] heart and with all [our] soul and with all [our] mind." In so doing we will be free

from idol worship.

4. He Who Does Not "Swear By What Is False."

When we think of this phrase in the most narrow sense, we think of telling the truth under oath in a court of law. And certainly this requirement of truthfulness under oath is part of what this verse means.

But I believe God is calling us to much more than just to tell the truth under oath. I believe this verse is an warning against lying in general. Proverbs contains many admonitions about bearing false witness:

"A false witness who pours out lies" (Pro 6:19 NIV) is one of the things the Lord hates.

"A truthful witness gives honest testimony, but a false witness tells lies." (Pro 12:17 NIV)

"A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who pours out lies will perish." (Pro 19:9 NIV)

And perhaps the most attention getting of all, Proverbs 21:28 states, "A false witness will perish, and whoever listens to him will be destroyed forever." Here we are told that not only will the liar perish, but that all who listen to his lies will also be destroyed forever!

And it is no wonder that God hates lies. Satan, the enemy of our soul, is the father of lies! Certainly anyone who desires to approach God's presence in power must not be a teller of lies. So let us examine our minds and hearts on this point. Do we cheat on paying our fair share to the government? Do we say that something will be done at work at a specific time when we know we cannot do it by that time? Do we exaggerate when repeating an incident or story? All these things, while seeming minor, go to bearing false witness.

This is one of the areas that the memorization of Scripture and songs of truth and worship are so important. Jesus said, "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." (Mat 12:34 NIV) If we fill our minds, our hearts, and then our mouths with Scripture, praise, and worship, what else can come out? Nothing but purity and truth!

The Treasure of Integrity

I trust that by now we understand why God so treasures integrity. Job must have grasped this because he was so upset at the prospect of losing his. He protested, ". . . till I die, I will not deny my integrity." (Job 27:5 NIV) I have observed that those who have attained a high degree of godly integrity are like Job, they are careful guard it. It is priceless.

And, of course, like most any treasure, it takes a very long time to attain. As we have already said, we are not born with integrity. It takes years, even decades, to reach the state in which a Christian moves in godly integrity. It is gained by ongoing and continuous righteous living. There are no shortcuts! That's one of the reasons it is so priceless, it takes so long to acquire!

How Do We Lose Our Integrity?

We know that integrity is developed over decades by

continually making the right decisions. Now let's ask the question, "Can we lose our integrity?" The answer to this question is obviously, "Yes." We lose our integrity through sin! But not the kind of sin that is common to those who have never really developed godly integrity. As Job, one with true integrity would never trade his treasure cheaply. The enemy is much more subtle in his approach to Christians with integrity.

I will deal here with the sin that I think the enemy uses most effectively with Christians of integrity: **compromise**. My observation of both the church and Scripture is that compromise is Satan's most effective weapon against Christian integrity. Solomon walked before the Lord in integrity until he began to compromise his worship of God with the pagan gods of his many wives. King Asa walked before the Lord in integrity until, in his old age, he began to compromise his reliance on God.

Note however, that one act of compromise does not rob someone of his or her integrity before God. The Apostle Peter compromised his integrity when he refused to eat with Gentile Christians when other Jewish leaders from Jerusalem showed up in Antioch. (See Galatians 2.) I don't think that this behavior of Peter's was enough to strip him of his integrity before God. But remember that Paul admonished Peter about his behavior. That is why we are directed to admonish one another (Rom 15:14) When we are properly corrected, we avoid beginning that pattern of compromise.

The problem arises when compromise becomes one's habit and custom. It is then that the Christian is on the brink of losing his or her integrity. But remember, habitual compromise of our godly integrity is begun with that first decision to compromise!

What About Those With Less-Than-Perfect Integrity?

Those who read this teaching and see themselves as short in the integrity department should prayerfully study and meditate about this lack. Scripture tells us that God is no respecter of persons. (Acts 10:34 KJV.) His desire is to see every one of His children fully sanctified and walking in godly integrity. So, if you find yourself measuring short and want to change, begin to make Psalm 24:3-5 a lifestyle. Every Christian should strive to develop clean hands, a pure heart, have no other idols before Him, and never be a false witness.

As one begins diligently to apply these truths to his life, the Holy Spirit will surely come to help. Don't give up when the occasional failure occurs. Don't expect miracles overnight. God honors our perseverance. This must be a permanent change of lifestyle. Never go back to the old ways. Then as the months turn into years, that priceless godly integrity will become obvious to all, including yourself!

Lord, I know you have called me to a life of godly integrity. And I know that there are areas in my life that fall short. I ask you now, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to begin to develop in me clean hands and a pure heart. May I forever turn from all idols in my life and never again bare false witness.

I trust you, Lord, to continue that sanctifying work you have begun in me, so that one day I will be able to stand before you with the godly integrity you so treasure. Amen.

1. Webster's New World Dictionary, Second College Edition, 1980.

2. Ibid.

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