

INTEGRITY, THE FORGOTTEN VIRTUE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on April 27, 1970 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

In times past the greatness of America has been reflected in the integrity of her people. Many things have contributed to America's greatness: a favorable climate, almost unlimited natural resources, the stimulating free-enterprise system, and a favorable form of government. However, nothing has been more significant in the success of our land than the spiritual resources of her people. In recent decades, however, it appears that we have lost a great deal of the moral strength which made our nation great.

Various surveys and experiments have shown a decline in morals and ethics. Some of you may remember a series of articles which appeared in the nation's largest monthly magazine several years ago. These articles were entitled, "The Repair Man Will Gyp You If You Don't Watch Out." The evidence seemed to be clear-cut and nation-wide that in a good many instances repairmen in various types of service would take advantage of the unwary customer. These and other, more recent developments lead us to ask, "What has happened to the reverence for truth and honesty that once characterized our society?" Also, we wonder, "Why it is that we so seldom hear the expression, 'His word is as good as his bond.'?" In our era of declining morality we recall the words of Solomon, "The integrity of the upright shall guide them; but the perverseness of the treacherous shall destroy them." (Prov. 11:3).

I am convinced that we need to spend more time in thinking and talking about the importance of integrity. By definition, integrity means "soundness of moral principle and character, complete honesty and uprightness with no masking of intent." Its opposite is hypocrisy. Integrity demands that a person put on no false front, that he wear no artificial mask, and that he play no deceptive role. It means that a person must be openly honest, making certain that he conveys no false claims either in word or in life. Integrity excludes lying, stealing, cheating, and every form of deception. It is a broad, inclusive term referring to one of the deepest and most important qualities of a worthy life. It describes the man who is worthy of complete trust.

The Scriptures Speak

The scriptures often speak of integrity, sometimes using the word itself, but often referring to the idea without using the word. For example Proverbs 19:1 reads, "Better is the poor that walketh in his integrity than he that is perverse in his lips and is a fool." Proverbs 20:7 adds, "A righteous man that walketh in his integrity, blessed are his children after him." In the earlier book of Deuteronomy we find these words of advice, "Thou shalt not wrest justice: thou shalt not respect persons; neither shalt thou take a bribe; for a bribe doth blind the eyes of the wise and pervert the words of the righteous. That which is altogether just shalt thou follow that thou mayest live, and inherit the land which Jehovah thy God giveth thee." (Deut. 16:19-20). I especially like the words of David, "Jehovah, who shall sojourn in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill? He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, And speaketh truth in his heart; He that slandereth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his friend, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbor; In whose eyes a reprobate is despised, But who honoreth them that fear Jehovah; He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not." (Ps. 15:1-4).

Writers Of All The Ages

Writers of all the various ages have commended integrity as a basic ingredient of character. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius gives this advice to Laertes,

This above all; to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

I have been impressed with the fact that those outside the bounds of the Christian religion have also paid tribute to the idea of integrity. Marcus Aurelius, who lived from 121 to 180 A.A, and who was Emperor of the Roman Empire for the last nineteen of his fifty-nine years, had this to say, "In the mind of him who is pure and good will be found neither corruption nor defilement or any malignant taint ... He is neither cowardly nor presuming; not enslaved to life nor indifferent to its duties; and in him is found nothing worthy of condemnation nor that which putteth to shame. Test by a trial how excellent is the life of a good man--the man who rejoiceth with the portion given him in the universal lot, and abides therein content; just in all his ways and kindly minded toward all men. This is moral perfection: to live each daily as though it were the last; to be tranquil, sincere, yet not indifferent to one's fate." Integrity is a quality appreciated seemingly by all men, whether they be Christians or simply thoughtful men of the world.

Where Integrity Was Lacking

When one turns to the Bible he finds several striking examples of the lack of integrity. As one of the most disquieting, I would refer to the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. Because of their father's special attention to Joseph, his other sons were jealous and

resentful. On one occasion they kidnapped their younger brother and sold him to a caravan of Midianites moving toward Egypt. In short, they sold their brother into Egyptian bondage. Then the text reads, “And they took Joseph’s coat, and killed a he-goat, and dipped the coat in the blood; and they sent the coat of many colors, and they brought it to their father, and said, This have we found; know whether it is thy son’s coat or not? And he knew it, and said, It is my son’s coat; an evil beast hath devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn in pieces. And Jacob rent his garment, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and his daughters rose up to comfort him.” (Gen. 37:31-35). This last sentence is the height of deception. How could they have hypocritically acted as if they were trying to comfort their father, knowing all the while that it was their lie that caused him to grieve? This is deception, at its worst.

In the New Testament we find an incident in the 22nd chapter of Matthew which shows a shocking lack of integrity even among some of the religious leaders of the day. A paragraph begins, “Then went the Pharisees, and took council how they might ensnare him in his talk.” Notice the ugly motive behind their action. “And they send to him their disciples, with the Herodians, saying, Teacher, we know that thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, and carest not for any man: for thou regardest not the person of men.” How fine their compliments, yet how insincere. Then they sprang the trap. “Tell us therefore, What thinkest thou? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not?” (Matt. 22:15-17). With ugly motives, with hypocritical words, and with the desire to ensnare him and destroy him, they had presented Jesus with a difficult dilemma. If he said to pay the taxes to Caesar, the Jewish people would be alienated; if, on the other hand, he said not to pay the taxes, the Roman overlords would be upon his back. You may remember the magnificent way in which Jesus freed himself from their trap: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s,” (Matt., 22:21).

A further example of deception and dishonesty of purpose among the religious leaders of Christ’s day is seen in a conversation, which followed the healing of a lame man at the gate of the temple. They asked, “What shall we do to these men? for that indeed a notable miracle hath been wrought through them is manifest to all that dwell in Jerusalem; and we cannot deny it. But that it spread no further among the people, let us threaten them, that they speak henceforth to no man in this name.” (Acts 4:16-17). Admitting the truth of the miracle, these selfishly oriented men tried to minimize the impact of the apostles’ miracle, knowing all the while that it was an authentic evidence of God’s power.

It is just here that I would like to pause and think about the great cost of hypocrisy and deception. It is so vitally important that parents not deceive their children, yet many of the younger generation feel that their parents have lied to them. Sometimes the lying has been in words. More often it has been in terms of hypocrisy--paying lip service to certain ideals of conduct, but denying those ideals in daily living. One of the complaints of the rebellious youth of our day is that the older generation has deceived them.

In exactly the same way, it is vitally important that government not deceive citizens, that teachers not deceive students, that owners not deceive employers, and that salespeople not deceive customers. Yet, in all these areas deception has sometimes been quite obvious. It is deeply disturbing when our government officially declares certain things to be true, only to admit a short time later that such was not the case. This is damaging indeed to the confidence that men have in their government. The false claims of advertisers and the unfulfilled promises of some salesmen destroy confidence and trust on a wide scale. Hypocrisy and deception are sinful and wrong and very costly.

Where Integrity Triumphed

There are other examples in the scriptures, however, which demonstrate the beauty and the power of integrity. Such a case is that of Job. His story begins, “There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and turned away from evil.” (Job. 1:1). He was a man who had many Children, large herds and flocks, and unlimited possessions. However, the Sabeans and the Chaldeans fell upon his family and possessions. There was pillage, destruction and death. Then, Job had nothing left. At that point we read, “Job arose, and rent his robe, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped; and he said, Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither; Jehovah gave, and Jehovah hath taken away; blessed be the name of Jehovah. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.” (Job 1:20-22).

The story continues in chapter 2: “Then said his wife unto him, Dost thou still hold fast thine integrity? renounce God and die. But he said unto her, Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God and shall we not receive evil? In all this did not Job sin with his lips.” At the other end of the long book of Job, after he had retained his integrity through the heaviest of persecutions, there are these words: “... and Jehovah gave Job twice as much as he had before.” (Job 2:9-10; 42:10).

To take another example. I would mention Polycarp, whose story we read in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History*, written in the early centuries of Christianity. Polycarp was a beloved elder in the first-century church. He was arrested because he would not acknowledge the Roman Emperor as divine, and offer some token of worship to him. The story, as written in ancient history, follows, “At length, as he advanced, the proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp, and he answered that he was... The governor continued to urge him, and said, ‘Swear, and I will dismiss you. Revile Christ.’ Polycarp replied, ‘Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me wrong; and how can I now blaspheme my King that has saved me?’ The governor still continuing to urge him, and again saying, ‘Swear by the genius of Caesar.’ Said Polycarp, ‘If you are so vain as to think that I should swear by the genius of Caesar, as you say,

pretending not to know who I am, hear my free confession. I am a Christian ... ' He again urged him, 'I will cause you to be consumed by fire, should you despise the beasts, and not change your mind. Polycarp answered, 'You threaten fire that burns for a moment and is soon extinguished, for you know nothing of the Judgment to come, and the fire of eternal punishment reserved for the wicked. But why do you delay? Bring what you wish.'" Here was a man who stood by his convictions even though it meant that he was burned at the stake. This is integrity.

When General Dean was a prisoner of the Communist forces in North Korea, there came a time when he was told that he was soon to be executed before a firing squad. He was given time to write a letter to his wife, in which he included instructions for their son. Under these most severe circumstances he wrote briefly but powerfully, "Tell Bill the word is integrity." General Dean undoubtedly gave a great deal of thought to the advice that he wanted to leave his son. It would be difficult to improve upon his one sentence. It says so very much, "Tell Bill the word is integrity."

While there are some obvious trends away from the open honesty of which we have been speaking, there are also some very heartening examples from time to time. Recently on a Sunday evening immediately after the worship a young college student backed his car into the fender of another car in the parking lot adjacent to the church. He might have hurriedly driven off in the night, with no one ever knowing that he was the cause of the crumpled fender. Instead, he stayed, took full responsibility for the accident, and made arrangements to repair the damage. This is integrity.

Only a few nights ago my phone rang and a young man in his early twenties at the other end of the line explained a problem which he faced. It was his responsibility to make out the charges for the services that his company rendered to its clients. His boss had instructed him to pad the charges on a certain shipment. His conscience told him that he must not do so. He called me to ask advice. After discussing it for a time we agreed that he could not ethically do as his employer had instructed because it was wrong. Instead, he decided that he would go to his employer and say simply, "I have always endeavored to be honest with you, I have always endeavored to be honest with the company, and I have always endeavored to be honest with our customers. I cannot do what you have asked me to do. If you insist, I will have to give up my job." It takes courage for a young man to make a speech like this, but this kind of integrity is the foundation upon which a man can build a life. It is the kind of integrity upon which a nation can be built.

conclusion

Open honesty, no false-front, no mask, this is what is needed in society today. May our lives be such that people will be able to trust us fully and completely. May there be no deception and no subterfuge. Christ lived such a life before us. He taught the highest of principles and then lived his life in perfect conformity to those principles. He was the same to all men. He was the same on every occasion. He was openly honest, hiding nothing, and ashamed of nothing. Eventually, his life so contrasted with those about him that it engendered hatred and jealousy, which ultimately caused his death. How great the cost! But, how inspiring the example!