

INTEGRITY CAN BE YOUR OFFENCE!

Today's Text: Acts 7: 1- 60

Extracts:

When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him...And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep [Acts 7: 54-60]

Aung San Suu Kyi (1945-) is the General Secretary of the National League for Democracy in Burma (officially the Republic of the Union of Myanmar) in Southeastern Asia.¹In the 1990 general elections, her party won 59% of the national votes and 81% of the seats in parliament, making her the most likely candidate for the post of Prime Minister. However, the military rulers placed her under house arrest from then until her release in November 2010. During her incarceration, she was not allowed to travel abroad to receive the Nobel Peace Prize (1991) or to bury her dead husband, Dr. Michael Aris (1999). She has grandchildren that she has never met. In reaction to her ordeals, she recently told a foreign journalist, "No matter the (military) regime's physical power, in the end they can't stop ...freedom. We shall have our time."

Ms Suu Kyi's offence is her integrity, that is, her steadfast adherence to high moral principles of political conduct. In our homes or professions, places of work or worship, integrity is a recurrent issue. When you attempt to uphold the truth or honourable conduct, you become the target for destruction-physically or literally. To succumb is to compromise your integrity and destroy your self-worth. To fight on is to create more enemies. What should you do? In this week's Bible story, Stephen, one of the seven deacons appointed by the apostles to administer the church, offended so many people with his integrity that they killed him in an attempt to silence him. Let us learn a few lessons from his experience to guide our own circumstances.

¹ Based on the following sources: "Profile: Aung San Suu Kyi," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11685977> , 15 Nov. 2010; and "Aung San Suu Kyi," From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aung_Suu_Kyi

1. Background: Exactly what was Stephen's offence?

A young high school graduate that went to the city to find work a few years ago drives home a brand new car, claiming he is now a successful business man. He has brought drinks and cash-filled envelopes to induce the elders to bless him. What should you do if you were one of those elders? A politician who had no visible means of livelihood before he won a largely rigged election has started to throw money around to buy loyalty from his opponents. You are poor and in need. What should be your reaction to his overtures? You work in an office where you know that your boss is sexually harassing his secretary who is a married woman. She has petitioned the CEO and you are the key witness. However, your boss has threatened to sack you if you give any evidence against him. What would you do?

In all such cases, and more, the question of integrity comes to the fore. The *Encarta Dictionary: English* defines integrity as “the quality of possessing and steadfastly adhering to **high moral principles or professional standards.**” That suggests that you do not have to be a believer to have integrity. It is a fundamental principle that makes the difference between truth and error. You need to satisfy yourself that the young man has made legitimate money before you bless him and accept his gifts. You need to subject the politician to close scrutiny to be sure he is not throwing public funds at you in order to buy your votes. You have to stand by your assaulted colleague as she defends her honour against your randy boss. However, ***there is a catch-22 in the matter. To defend your integrity will cost you some pecuniary benefits; but to compromise your integrity could cost you your honour and self-worth, especially your standing with God.***

In this week's Bible story, Stephen faced a similar choice. He was one of the seven deacons appointed by the apostles to assist them to administer the young church [**Acts 6: 1-5**]. As a result of their effective support, the word of God spread and the number of disciples multiplied greatly, and the ministers (priests) were obedient to their faith in Jesus Christ [**v. 7**]. However, sooner than later, Stephen began to have problems within the church. What did he do wrong? To answer that question, let us follow the story:

a) *Stephen's integrity*

We are told that Stephen was “full of faith and power” and “did great wonders and signs among the people.” When some believers from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia disputed with him, “they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke” [**vv. 8-10**]. In other words, ***in everything, Stephen stuck to his high moral principles which were in turn anchored on his faith in Christ Jesus.***

Stephen did not try to be politically correct- being one thing to the Jews and something else to the Gentiles. Anyone can easily fall into the trap of hypocrisy. For example, Paul once had cause to chastise Peter for playing

the hypocrite. Peter had gone to Antioch to visit Gentile disciples. He and Barnabas, amongst other Jewish disciples, mixed freely and ate with them. However, as soon as certain Jewish men came from James (the half-brother of Jesus who was one of the three pillars of the church in Jerusalem), Peter and Barnabas separated themselves from the Gentiles, “fearing those who were of the circumcision.” Paul used the opportunity to remind all believers that “a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ.” He added, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself to me” [Gal. 2: 9-20]. That was the kind of integrity that Stephen demonstrated among the Jews and Gentiles in the early church.

b) What his critics saw

Stephen’s critics and enemies saw his integrity in a different light. He was engaging in acts of **blasphemy** against their God! They “secretly induced men to say, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God’” [Acts 6: 11]. They stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes who seized Stephen and brought him before the council. Then, they procured false witnesses to attest that Stephen did not stop to speak “blasphemous words against this holy place and the law,” that he was attempting to “change the customs which Moses [had] delivered to [them]” by teaching that Jesus would destroy their place of worship [vv. 12-14]!

When you are a person of integrity, people will use stories that fit your circumstances to lie against you! For example, if your spouse is out of town, every woman or man that enters your house during that period is your lover, even if one of them was your parent or sibling or child! When your business begins to thrive after a long stretch of hard work, you have just joined a cult! Hear, for instance, what those governors plotting to remove Daniel from his privileged position with Darius the Mede said of him, “We shall not find any charge against this Daniel unless we find it against him concerning the law of his God” [Dan. 6: 1-5]. Therefore, do not be surprised to hear weird things about you when you try to uphold your integrity.

c) Stephen’s defence

When they dragged Stephen before the Jewish Council (the Sanhedrin), we are told that all those who sat there, looking steadfastly at him, “saw his face as the face of an angel” [Acts 6: 15]. I do not know what the face of an angel looks like because I have not seen one! However, I believe that Stephen looked calm and self-assured. He was sure of what he was doing because he was a man “full of faith and power” who did great wonders

and signs among the people [v. 8] in the name of Jesus. So, *when he was invited by the high priest to defend himself, Stephen saw it as an opportunity to preach Christ to the incredulous!* He laid out his case for Jesus as follows:

- Abraham’s call was to faith, not to law [**Acts 7: 1-8**]
- The Jewish sojourn in Egypt was to prepare a favoured nation to receive their coming King. Speaking of Him, Moses told the church in the wilderness, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him, you shall hear” [vv. 9-43]
- Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem was a figure of the True Tabernacle of God [vv. 44-50] {recall that one accusation against Jesus during His trial was that He had said that He would pull down the temple and rebuild it in three days [**Matt 26: 59-61**]; whereas He was referring to the temple of His body [**Jn 2: 13-32**]}
- Finally, Stephen rebuked his listeners, representing the Jewish nation, for being “stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears!” by resisting the Holy Spirit who had all through their history revealed the coming of the Messiah in the person of Jesus Christ [**Acts 7: 51-53**].

Stephen’s testimony and rebuke was too hard for his critics to take. They dragged him outside the city and stoned him to death. As he was dying, he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin” [vv. 54-60].

Yes, *Stephen was killed for his integrity but he forgave his murderers.* His integrity encouraged other believers to realize that “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” [**Phil. 1: 21**]. The man that coined those words was that same young man that kept the clothes of the witnesses that killed Stephen. His name was Saul [**Acts 7: 58**] who later became Paul after his conversion, and he was to become the biggest influence in the spread of Christianity to the Gentile world. Thus, Stephen’s death forced the believers to scatter into other regions, thereby fulfilling the mission of Christ to take the Gospel “to the end of the earth” [**Acts 1: 8**].

2. Lessons for upholding your own integrity

People give up their integrity for temporary or transient gains. People lose their integrity for fear of pain or physical death. What they hardly realize is that *it is not easy or even possible to regain your integrity once you have lost it.* If you doubt it, look around your circle of family, friends, colleagues and fellow worshippers. That is why Jesus has warned, “What profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” [**Matt. 16: 26**]. Therefore, the following lessons from this week’s Bible story should be helpful as you strive to uphold your integrity:

a) *Know the source of your integrity*

As Stephen was about to die, he was “full of the Holy Spirit.” He gazed up and saw “the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” [Acts 7: 55]. He knew the source of his integrity. Do you know yours?

Take the case of the sons of the Rechabites that God used to teach the people of Israel obedience through the ministry of Prophet Jeremiah. The prophet set bowls full of wine before the sons of the Rechabites and gave them cups to drink the wine. They refused, saying, “We will drink no wine for ... our father commanded us, saying, ‘You shall drink no wine, you nor your sons, forever’” [Jer. 35: 1-8]. They had vowed to their father never to drink wine and they had kept it through their generations. That is integrity in action

By professing faith in Jesus, through the baptism of water and the Holy Spirit, you have vowed to renounce the devil and all his evil works. Your integrity is now built on faith in Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith [Heb. 12: 2]. *Since by faith you stand [2 Cor. 1: 24]*, then *your integrity must be firmly planted on Christ if you hope to stand by it*. If you continue to sin, you are putting your integrity at risk.

b) *Defend your integrity, not yourself!*

When **Stephen** was brought for trial before the Sanhedrin, he **defended his integrity, not himself**. He spoke about Jesus and blamed his people for their inflexibility and hard heartedness. In his view, **accepting Jesus as the Son of God was as obvious as accepting Abraham as their father and Moses as their law giver**. That incensed his listeners more than his accusers had alleged.

Hypocrites get caught because sooner than later, what they do in secret contradicts what they do in public. But **when your integrity is Christ-centred, what you do in secret is the same as what you do in public**. When you are falsely accused, God will exonerate you. For example, when Potiphar’s wife falsely accused Joseph and caused her husband to put him in Pharaoh’s jail, little did she know that Joseph’s integrity (refusing to lie with her for fear of his God) was soon to make him the governor of Egypt! That is why Jesus has assured you, “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven” [Matt. 5: 11-12].

c) *Stand by your faith when the chips are down*

Stephen was killed for his integrity. Daniel was thrown into the lion's den for his integrity [**Dan. 6: 1-17**]. Paul and Silas were imprisoned at Philippi in Macedonia for their integrity (by Christ Jesus) [**Acts 16: 16-24**]. In all those cases, they stood by their faith and won tremendous vindication. Stephen died and went straight to heaven. God shut up the mouths of the hungry lions and Daniel escaped unhurt [**Dan. 6: 18-23**]. As Paul and Silas prayed and sang at midnight, God shook the foundations of the prison (through an earthquake) and the chains in their hands fell off while the prison doors were opened! In the end, the jailer and his family gave their lives to Christ [**Acts 16: 25-34**].

In like manner, there are people watching you as you strive to maintain your integrity. They will pay attention to what you say or do. They will scrutinize your tenacity and the outcomes of your struggles. In the end, it is your faith that they will remember more than anything else. That is why the death and resurrection of Jesus are more remembered than His miracles, as the *Apostles' Creed* confirms!

3. Conclusion: Go with God!

People pursue material success and yet nobody can claim to know what such success actually means. People want to achieve early and yet nobody knows for how long s(he) will live. Some people say that if you cannot beat them, you should join them, but do you know who they are? Everybody is not doing it! That was why Jesus warned His disciples, "These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble... The time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me" [**Jn 16: 1-3**].

Integrity can be your offence. For its sake, you will face ethnic or racial discrimination or religious persecution; you will be tempted with greed or lust; you will be attacked by demonic forces to make you renounce Christ. Through it all, only holding on to your faith in Christ will save you.

Go with God and He will guide your steps to everlasting joy and success.