

INVEST IN YOUR INTEGRITY!

Today's Text: Eccl. 7

Extracts:

A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one's birth... For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin. Also do not take to heart everything people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. For many times, also, your own heart has known that even you have cursed others.... Truly, this only I have found: that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes [Eccl. 7: 1, 20-22, 29]

In 2004, a councillor from Trinidad & Tobago's ruling party in a local government council controlled by the opposition party wrote a letter to the Prime Minister, alleging that he had bribed two members of his cabinet. The Prime Minister quietly referred the matter to the Integrity Commission for investigation. However, the opposition party blew the matter open in parliament. In response, the affected ministers came out to address the press. One of them admitted receiving money from the accuser but it was repayment for the loan that he had reportedly granted him in 2000, long before the accused became a minister. In addition, he resigned his ministerial appointment, pending his vindication by the Integrity Commission. The other minister, on the other hand, has denied taking any bribe from the accuser and preferred to stay put as minister.

A number of questions immediately come to mind concerning integrity. Why has the man who has openly confessed to bribing public officers not been arrested and interrogated by the police? Why did the Prime Minister refer the matter to the Integrity Commission and not to the police? Why has one minister resigned even when the case against him has not been proved? Why has the other accused minister chosen to remain in office? The answers are not obvious, just as what integrity is all about is also not clear-cut.

In today's study, we shall examine the subject and take a clear stand on integrity from God's perspective.

1. Integrity-says who?

Ordinarily, integrity means “moral uprightness.” That opens a Pandora’s box! Whose morality? What constitutes uprightness? We may have as many views on these as there are religious beliefs, races, cultures, values or period in history. However, as believers who are guided by the word of God, we should have no problem defining what integrity is all about. According to that word, “the righteous man walks in his *integrity* and his children are blessed after him” [**Prov. 20: 7**], and it is better to walk in integrity and be poor than to be perverse in one’s lips and be a fool [**Prov. 19: 1**]. Integrity does not come from self-praise; rather, “let another man praise you” [**Prov. 27: 2**], and “a man is valued by what others say of him” [**v. 21**]. Could that explain why we go for impressions, just to make others give us a higher “rating” on integrity?

Integrity consists of the following:

a) *What we think or intend to do*

Our thoughts and intentions may say one thing but those watching us understand what we do differently. For example, when Abraham and his wife, Sarah, journeyed to Gerar, they were the guests of Abimelech, the king of that place. Abraham told him that Sarah was his own sister and Sarah confirmed it. Presumably, by the custom of those days [remember, the Ten Commandments had not yet been given and morality was based on conscience or a specific word from God], the king took Sarah to sleep with her. That night, God appeared to Abimelech in a dream and told him, “You are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man’s wife.” Abimelech had not yet touched her. He replied, “Lord, will You slay a righteous nation also? Did he not say to me, ‘She is my sister’? And she, even she herself said, ‘He is my brother.’ *In the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands I have done this.*” God responded, “Yes, *I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart. For I also withheld you from sinning against Me; therefore, I did not let you touch her*” [**Gen. 20: 1-6**].

b) *What we say or do*

Sometimes, our moral uprightness is measured by what other people hear us say or see us do. Some of us exaggerate a great deal about ourselves. Some of us tell half-truths or blown-out lies. Some of us say one thing and do something else. That is why Jesus has said that we shall be known by our fruits.

Let us take two examples from the Scriptures. Simon was a sorcerer who was led to Christ through Philip’s ministry in Samaria [**Acts 8: 5-13**]. When the apostles heard that Samaria had been converted, they sent Peter

and John to lay hands on the new converts to receive the Holy Spirit. When Simon saw that by the laying of hands people received the Holy Spirit, he gave money to Peter to give him the same power! Peter replied, “Your money perish with you, because you *thought* that the gift of God could be purchased with money!” [vv.14-20]. By his words and actions, Simon demonstrated that he was far from being converted. He was still a sorcerer!

During the reign of Josiah as king of Judah, doorkeepers collected money from worshippers entering the house of God. The money was meant to pay carpenters, builders and masons who were repairing the house. Did anybody bother to count the collections? It was considered unnecessary: “there need be no accounting made with them of the money delivered into their hand because *they deal faithfully*” [2 Kgs 22: 3-7]. In deed our integrity is measured by how others react.

2. Nevertheless, there are shades of integrity!

Since it takes others to measure our integrity, they can catch us at our tricks, no matter how much disguise or “make-up” that we wear. They can see us in one or all of the following disguises:

a) *The chameleon!*

The chameleon is an animal that has the ability to change its colour to suit the environment in which it finds itself. That way, it can hide from predators and preys alike. Many of us have different strokes for different folks! For example, the politician who is looking for votes will strive to represent the interests of as many different groups as possible. However, just as the chameleon cannot successfully hide in an open space, the politician can be exposed when s(he) faces the electorate *at the same time*. There is the story of a politician who claimed to be *pro-choice* on the issue of abortion. When he met the *pro-life* group separately, he said that he was with them. It was a similar response with the *pro-abortion* group. Then, one day, both groups met him at the same time! His *hypocrisy* was palpable.

Jesus always condemned hypocrites who “love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, *that they may be seen by men*” [Matt. 6: 5]. Take the example of Absalom, David’s favourite son. The young handsome man surrounded himself with chariots and horses and fifty men in his entourage. He would stand by the entrance to king David’s palace and be evaluating lawsuits being brought before the king with such words as, “Your case is good and right; but there is no deputy of the king to hear you....Oh, that I were made judge in the land, ... then I would give (all) justice.” That way, “Absalom stole the hearts of the men

of Israel” [2 Sam. 15: 1-6]. The truth was that he was setting the stage to rebel against his father! Sooner than later, the chameleon had no place to hide. He rebelled and threw his father into exile [vv. 7-22].

b) *The serpent!*

The serpent is a wise animal that can easily hide from danger and strike at its prey unexpectedly. Human serpents are the smart Alects who work extremely hard to hide their unfavourable qualities and show a public image of integrity and righteousness. They are as wise as the serpent [Matt. 10: 16]. However, sooner than later, their “confidential files” are revealed to the public by the paparazzi or investigators. The double life of a highly respected Nigerian pastor was revealed after his death when two women (with their children) each published her husband’s obituary in the daily newspapers! David’s adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband did not become public knowledge until the prophet Nathan had exposed him.

Jesus has warned us to “beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but *inwardly* they are ravenous wolves” [Matt. 7: 15]. Satan himself poses as an angel of light, so do his ministers. Therefore, those “false prophets, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ” [2 Cor. 11: 13-15] are giving you a false impression of their true integrity. Sooner than later, their sins will find them out [Num. 32: 23] and you will know their true nature!

c) *The ostrich!*

The ostrich is a bird that buries its head in the sand and beats its chest, saying, “nobody can see me now!” The truth is that it is the only one that cannot see itself while others have a full view. This describes our conduct or mannerisms that everybody else knows about or eat except ourselves. How many people can smell their breath? Do you know why your colleagues at work do not like to work or eat with you? Could it be your perfume, hairstyle, colour combination, body movement, manner of speaking, eating and drinking habits, etc? How do you know what will impress others in order for you to be favourably rated?

Sapphira, Ananias’ wife, played one such ostrich. She and her husband had sold a possession and conspired to give part of the proceeds to the early church. Her husband went ahead of her and told Peter that he had brought the whole value of the sale. However, the Holy Spirit had revealed to Peter that the man was lying. Since sins against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven here on earth or hereafter, Ananias was struck dead immediately and buried. Three hours later, his wife came in. She did not know that her husband had died or that he had lied about the sale *but*

everyone else knew. So, when Peter asked her whether she and her husband had brought the full value of the sale, she answered in the affirmative! What did that tell the onlookers about her integrity?

We see from the forgoing that no matter how hard we try to build integrity the *world's way*, we can never win. Hypocrites, masquerading as chameleons or serpents or ostriches, will ultimately be caught and their true faded colours revealed. That is why the Preacher has said, “there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin.” He added, “this only I have found: *that God made man upright*” [Eccl. 7: 20, 29]. Therefore, the only integrity that lasts is the one that is built on God’s principles.

3. Integrity is of the heart!

In the eyes of the world, your integrity can never be good enough. If you are the chameleon, they soon see you as an inconsistent opportunist. He who is regarded as a hero out there may be seen as a terrorist right here, and yet both groups are evaluating the same action or event. Even with sinless Jesus who was consistent and did good everywhere He went, the public said that He was a deceiver [Jn 7: 12] and the Pharisees called Him prince of demons, Beelzebub [Matt. 10: 25]. Yet, God called Him “My beloved Son” because He knew His heart [Matt. 3: 17]. Therefore, if you think that you are smart and can hide your dirty laundry from public view, you are creating *impressions*, not demonstrating integrity. You will soon discover that “whatever is hidden will be revealed” [Matt. 10: 26]. So, only reliance on *God's way* can lead us to the integrity that lasts.

God’s way is quite simple. There is no just person on earth who does good [Eccl. 7: 20], “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” [Rom. 3: 23]. Therefore, there is no one righteous before God [Ps. 14: 1-3], by own effort but by grace. The righteousness of God comes “through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe” [Rom. 3: 22]. If you look at the Faith Hall of Fame [Heb. 11], you will find such names as Abraham [v. 8] and David [v. 32]. By faith, they were declared righteous by God and “the righteous man walks in his integrity and his children are blessed after him” [Prov. 20: 7]. Therefore, integrity comes from the heart “for the Lord does not see as man sees; *for the man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart*” [1 Sam. 16: 7].

We all know that Abraham did fumble in a few aspects of his life, especially in respect of Ishmael and his mother. By human standards, we would consider him irresponsible for marrying his wife’s maid! However, because Abraham believed God and walked according to His guidance, he was called God’s “friend forever” [2 Chron. 20: 7], and God Himself called him “My friend” [Is. 41: 8].

Consider also David. We all know of his great sin of adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband, Uriah. Yet, because he was a man of faith, God called David the man after His own heart [1 Sam. 13: 14].

What does it take to be a person of faith? You have to be a *dove* and a *lamb*. As a lamb, you are *completely dependent* on your Shepherd, the Lamb of God who has shed His precious blood for us all on the cross at Calvary. Repent and confess your sins to God. Accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour, and look on to Him as the Author and Finisher of your faith [**Heb. 12: 2**]. Thereafter, walk by faith and not by sight [**2 Cor. 5:7**]. So, if you have done that, who can say that you have no integrity? If God is for you, who can be against you [**Rom. 8: 31**]?

As a dove, you are harmless even among wicked neighbours or colleagues or the enemy [**Matt. 10: 16**]. All you strive to do is to live peaceably with others, always looking for their good. You forgive without waiting for apologies. You are patient in tribulation. You rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. You no longer set your mind on high things but associate with the humble. You are no longer wise in your own opinion. In summary, you no longer allow evil to overcome you but you overcome evil with good [**Rom. 12: 9-21**]. With that kind of profile, who can say that you have no integrity?

4. Conclusion

In an age of growing wickedness and low moral tone among leaders in government, business, home or church, integrity has acquired a new urgency. Integrity comes from how others see you. As we have shown in today's lesson, you can never win if you are trying to impress others. That is because you do not control all the measures by which you are being evaluated. *The only sure way to your true integrity is how God sees you.* If you do not believe in God and His Christ, then, you are living dangerously because you have no integrity at all.

To invest in your integrity is to take a decision today, *this moment*, to *let your life match your faith in Christ Jesus*. Anything less is a wide and paved road to self-deception.