

Practically Spiritual *Integrity*

Proverbs 11:3

³ *The integrity of the upright guides them,
but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them.*

There is a field of engineering called Structural Integrity that assesses the integrity of structures such as buildings and bridges. Dr Steve Roberts defined the term structural integrity as "***the science and technology of the margin between safety and disaster.***" Even little cracks in the integrity of a structure can lead to disastrous results.

At 5pm on Dec. 15th, 1967, the Silver Bridge connecting West VA to Ohio suddenly collapsed into the Ohio River, killing 46 people. Investigators determined the cause of failure to be a fracture in one steel eye bar. This fracture was formed during the casting of the eye bar but it took 39 years for it to finally give way. Even little cracks in the integrity of a structure can lead to disastrous results.

The same is true in the building of a life. Even little cracks in the integrity of a character can lead to disastrous results. ³ *The integrity of the upright guides them, but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them.* Like so many wisdom principles in Proverbs, this passage contrasts two paths: the path of integrity which leads to a life well-lived and the path of the crooked and treacherous which leads to a devastating end.

We are in a series called Practically Spiritual and this morning I want us to examine practically spiritual integrity. The Hebrew word for integrity means "completeness" or wholeness. An integer in math is a whole number. When the Bible talks about integrity, its referring to a person who isn't deceitful or hypocritical, someone who is on the inside what they portray on the outside, someone who is in private what they are in public. The words authentic and genuine come to mind.

In Proverbs integrity is contrasted with crookedness. One has character that stands upright, the other is bent and twisted by a lack of integrity. Last week we talked about the power of the choices we make. When we come to a moral, ethical fork in the road, we have a choice to make: do I do what's right, or do I do something that compromises my character? Something that breaks my word, or is deceptive, or in some other way morally wrong. At that point, integrity is a moral compass that guides us to make the right choice. Not necessarily the easiest choice (we'll talk about that in a few minutes) but the right choice.

Over and over again, God's word calls us to live upright lives of blamelessness, purity, and righteousness. Lives of moral and ethical integrity. But this raises a question: on the one hand we're called to be blameless and righteous. On the other hand, the core message of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that no one is righteous, no not one, that we are all sinners deserving of God's wrath. So how do I preach a message calling us to live lives of integrity without it devolving into a moralistic, "try real hard to be good people!" kind of message? What is the relationship between our integrity and the gospel?

I. **The relationship between integrity and the gospel**

The good news of Jesus is that we can never be good enough to earn heaven, so Jesus earned it for us, and then gives it to us as a gift when we believe in him. When we place our trust in Christ, we are not only forgiven of our sins, but we receive the righteousness of Christ - not our own righteousness - as a free gift by the grace of God. God declares us righteous even though we really are not. That's justification. Justification is 100% God's work - we can't earn our justification, we can't add to our

justification, and we can't grow in our justification. At the moment you believed in Jesus, you were completely and totally justified - sinless and righteous in God's sight as if you were as sinless and righteous as Jesus is. To use a theological term, this is referred to as "imputed righteousness". It's imputed to our account as if it is our righteousness, but it's Christ's righteousness.

*⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, **not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith** Phil 3:8-9*

We need to keep this central or we will drift into a kind of moralism where we equate Christianity with being fine, upstanding people who have good values and live lives of integrity. The first brutally honest step of integrity is for us to admit we are not men and women of high integrity, we are sinners. Sin has bent and twisted our character so that our moral compass is constantly pointing in the wrong direction. We rebel against God's perfect rule in so many ways: we lie, we steal, we lust, we deceive, we fight, we cheat. Our hearts are filled with pride and selfishness. God created us in His image, but sin twisted us so that, while we still retain the goodness and nobility of God's image, we are also fatally crooked inside. The good news is that when we confess our sin and call upon Jesus to save us, he is powerful to save us from our sin! Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness!

But the good news doesn't stop there. Because after God saves us through faith in Christ, He goes to work on us. This is called sanctification and we have a part in this work. We can cooperate with God or we can resist God, but we do not rightly understand the gospel if we think that God isn't concerned about our character. That God isn't concerned about our integrity as a man or woman of faith. God is very concerned and by the power of the Holy Spirit God begins to straighten out our crookedness. He begins to untwist what sin twisted. He begins to change our nature from treacherous to integrous. This work will never be completed, we won't be perfect this side of heaven, but His work in us is real. It's authentic. And it's not just slapping a veneer over us so we look a little better - the Holy Spirit goes to work on the core of who we are, remaking and reforging our character so that we become men and women of integrity. I think one of the best passages for explaining our part is found in 1 John 1:5

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. 1 John 1:5-10

II. We walk in integrity by walking in the light

This passage describes a life lived in the light, a life lived with integrity. The integrity of the upright guides them to walk in the light. We either walk in truth (light) or we walk in lies (darkness). If we walk in the darkness and claim to have close fellowship with God, we're lying to ourselves. If we disconnect our spirituality from our integrity, we are in really dangerous territory. Maybe this is particularly on my heart now because I recently learned about a pastor (not in this state) who has literally left a 50 plus year trail of devastated lives and divided churches by his abuse of young men. He used his position of trust to commit wicked sins. And every time he got caught he would claim to have repented of this sin, declare himself forgiven, and jump right back into ministry where he would continue his destruction of lives. He conveys himself as a spiritual man who deeply loves God, but it's a spirituality that is disconnected from

any sense of integrity. According to John he isn't a spiritual man at all, he is a treacherous man who inwardly is bent and twisted and crooked. We can't disconnect spirituality from integrity.

The Holy Spirit brings the light of truth to our lives and convicts us to walk in that light. And as we do, integrity grows in us. Conversely, when we refuse the light of the Holy Spirit and choose to walk in darkness, crookedness grows in us and if we continue to be unrepentant it will ultimately lead to devastation. That devastation might come in one sudden moment like a bridge collapsing without warning decimating our character, our reputation, and our loved ones. But more often, integrity is lost through erosion. Slow and small decisions that erode away at the integrity of a person. Small fractures, small compromises that chip away at our integrity without us knowing it. The remedy is to renounce the darkness and run to the light. When we mess up, when we misstep, when we sin, we need to bring it into the light by confessing it. Integrity isn't being perfect, it's being honest with God and each other and pursuing the light. It's very practical...and very spiritual.

You know what's healthy? Keep Judgment Day in mind. Keep that Day in mind today. Judgment Day will be a day of intense light when God throws open the drapes on every little secret we thought we hid so well. Jesus says of that day: *Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops. Luke 12:3* I recently got a reminder from FaceBook to recheck my privacy settings. On that day it won't matter what our privacy settings are, God is going to be set them on public and everyone will see the things we tried to keep hidden. Kind of like what Harvey Weinstein is going through now - things he never meant for the world to know or see is splashed on the front pages of every newspaper. It's healthy for us to live with that day in mind. Here are some ways that over the years I've seen we can be tempted to live in darkness by disconnecting integrity from our spirituality.

- Keeping secret rooms in our lives containing secret sins (key word: secrecy) - Jesus said that our secrets are going to be shouted from the housetops, so we can bring them in the light now or we can bring them in the light then. Now is better!
- Acting one way in public and another way in private - if the people closest to you have a hard time respecting you or think you're a hypocrite, that should be a warning sign.
- We are hard on others but give ourselves a pass for doing the same things.
- Everything seems to be someone else's fault - this is a way of denying that we sin. We might confess theoretical sin ("yeah, I know I sin. In fact, there was that time 23 years ago...") but never confess specific sin in a timely way and ask for forgiveness ("when I said those harsh things I was sinfully angry, will you forgive me?" or "I see some ways that my pride has been affecting our relationship and want to make it right. Will you forgive me and help me grow in humility?")
- This is a really dangerous one: we think our spirituality earns us the right to moral compromise in certain ways. This is the kind of spiritual deception that John is describing: walking in the darkness but thinking we're in fellowship with the Father.

Integrity means throwing open the drapes and letting the light in *now*. Living our lives with the realization that one day it's all going to be out in the open, so better to get it out in the open now through confession and repentance. We can humbly ask the Holy Spirit to shine His light deep in our core, and work to match our inner life with our outer life.

Integrity isn't being perfect - it's being real. It's being whole. It's not letting our character fracture into compartments. Integrity presses us to walk in the light by humbly confessing our sin to God and those our sin has affected. When we do, Jesus is faithful and just to forgive us those sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

III. Integrity guides us to the right path, not the easiest path

³ *The integrity of the upright guides them,
but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them.*

I take this to mean that integrity is a kind of built in compass or navigational tool that guides us when we have a choice of paths. But we need to know that, while integrity chooses the right paths, the best paths, they aren't usually going to be the easiest paths. They aren't going to be the paths of least resistance. Integrity doesn't always track with popular. Convictions don't always track with convenience. There is often a cost to integrity.

- Joseph paid a high cost for refusing to sin with Potiphar's wife.
- David refused to kill King Saul, even when the Lord made it easy for him to do so, and so he had to continue living life on the run with Saul seeking his life.
- Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow when everyone else was bowing; Daniel refused to stop praying when the king ordered everyone to stop praying. These men were willing to pay the ultimate cost rather than compromise their fidelity to the One True God.
- Jeremiah was thrown down a well to die for speaking the word of God faithfully.

If we want to walk in integrity, we need to know there will be times when it just won't be easy. We need to be prepared that there will be times when it costs us - maybe a lot. It might mean being laughed at by co-workers. It might mean losing a promotion or a job. It might mean being rejected by friends. I think it's important that we know this and ask God for the resolve to walk in integrity.

God's work of integrity in us is a work of inner strength. It's God working convictions in us that don't fracture under weight. It's God working honesty in us that doesn't break under pressure. God's intention for our lives is that they not be like the Silver Bridge, for many years looking good on the outside, but with a small, unseen fracture in integrity that makes it a ticking time bomb. Crooked paths eventually lead to disastrous results. God's plan for us is better than that.

God's will for our lives as Christians is that we live uprightly and walk in the light. That we be guided by integrity, which is very practical, and very spiritual. And when we fail, when we sin, we don't ignore it hoping no one will ever know, we bring it into the light by confessing it to God and repenting of it. We must always, always, remember that we can only live with integrity because we live by God's grace. It is God's amazing grace that saves us. God's amazing grace that forgives us. God's amazing grace that has recast the fractures and compromises and failures in our lives and made us new creatures in Christ. God's grace makes us stand upright where we once were bent and crooked. And on that Day, when we stand before the Lord and the privacy settings are adjusted to public and everything unseen will be seen, on that Day our only plea will be Jesus' blood and righteousness. And that will be more than enough.

Maybe as I've been speaking, the Lord has been convicting you of a certain fracture. Unseen, maybe small, but you know it's there and you know the Lord wants to address it. Confess it to the Lord, be honest with God, and ask Him by the power of the Holy Spirit to recast that area of your character in His image. The good news of the gospel is that God sees every little fault and fracture and fissure in our character and Jesus died to forgive us of them *and* free us from them.

Let's go to the God who sees all.