

Wade Street Sermon 8th June 2008

Everyday Disciples – Integrity in the workplace

First Reading – Genesis 17:1-8

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."

Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God."

Second reading - 2 Corinthians 2:14-3:6

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God.

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

May the Lord bless this reading of his Holy Word, Amen

Sermon Start

The subject I was asked to discuss is “Everyday disciples: Integrity in the workplace”. It was quite difficult for me to know where to start with a subject like that, so I’ve looked at the key questions I wanted answered.

There were three key questions I wanted to address:-

- What is integrity?
- Why does integrity matter?
- How can we maintain our integrity under pressure?

Before we delve in - I just want to take a quick survey

- Please raise your hands if you are currently spend part of your week in a workplace – paid or voluntary.
- Raise your hands if you have previously been employed.

I just wanted to get a sense of whether this talk would be relevant and from the reaction I can see that it will. Whether it will be interesting is a different issue.

But actually, don’t worry if you don’t work. Integrity is not something that is just relevant to a workplace. It is also relevant in school, university, Monday lunch club, in fact everywhere that we as Christians operate. The reason I think Ian asked me to look at integrity at work is that it is in the workplace that a person’s integrity can come under greater than normal pressure. (Liz has been keeping us updated on the “Apprentice” use example of Lee lying on his CV)

And also, the work place also consumes a large part of our lives – we’ll spend around 25% of our time at work and sometimes it can feel like a lot more.

1. What is Integrity?

Let’s look at a basic dictionary definition

Integrity is the basing of one’s actions on an internally **consistent** framework of **principles**.

A person is said to have integrity to the extent that everything that person does is derived from the same core set of values.

Here’s what I think the message is - as a Christian we should take our core values (beliefs and attitudes) and apply them to the way we live our lives.

Our behaviour should be a reflection of what we believe, or what we say we believe.

- Honest
- Fair
- Loving
- Caring
- Sincere
- Moral
- Pure in motive
- Delivering on promises
- Self aware, self reflective

Take these and apply them consistently, in whatever situation you find yourself.

One thing I noticed when I started putting this list together is that it would be weakened if I was only able to apply some values – (i.e. a lack of sincerity would undermine my claim to be a Christian).

So integrity is about being a complete person - a fully rounded person. This goes to the root of the word integrity.

Look at it like this - we sometimes talk about the structural integrity of buildings – (if you start to remove a few key building blocks, the building starts to disintegrate). Integrity and disintegration are practically opposites.

In fact it is helpful when looking at concepts like integrity to look at opposites because unfortunately integrity is something we are more used to reading about in a negative sense (i.e. the media love to draw our attention to public figures who lack integrity).

One such opposite term is hypocrisy. Unfortunately, we're all pretty familiar with this term in our daily lives.

This week I read a story about the lobby group (called plane stupid) who are putting pressure on individuals and government not to build a third runway at Heathrow. Anyway, one of the main organisers flew to New York to meet other anti-flight protesters. This is hypocrisy in action. A distinct lack of integrity.

In the passage we heard earlier (Genesis 17:2) God instructs Abram to walk before him and be blameless (the Hebrew word for blameless in this context is very similar to our concept of integrity).

Someone made this point once and it has always stuck.- basically there are (at least) three Douglas'. There is the Douglas that others see. There is the Douglas that I see and then there is the Douglas that God sees. We all know which Douglas is the real Douglas.

We have a capacity to deceive ourselves and walking before God is a constant reminder that we can't afford to deceive ourselves.

So - you could sum up integrity as – practice what you preach although in reality for us as Christians it is more a case of “practice what God preaches, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves”.

2. If that is integrity, why does it matter?

It matters because the way we live our lives is a reflection of our faith. We are ambassadors for Christ. There was intense scrutiny on the church 2,000 years ago and that scrutiny is no less intense today. In his first letter John says this “Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6). You're probably familiar with the phrase that your life is the only bible that some people will read and it's true.

Paul puts it like this in the reading– “you are a letter from Christ”. So think of it like this – Christians should be like little Christs walking around, bringing little glimpses of the Kingdom with them.

I can think of several times when I've told people that I'm a Christian and they've looked shocked. I like to think that they're surprised because they can't believe that such a young handsome, hip and trendy guy could be a Christian. The truth is that I've probably not been living my life the way that Jesus would have it.

Our failure to live with Christian integrity undermines the power and impact of the gospel. If it makes no discernible difference to our lives, why would we expect it to have an impact on others?

I have a friend and when when I talk about the gospel she only wants to talk about her experience of Christians that have behaved badly. The sad thing is - I know that those people would be devastated if they knew the impact their behaviour had.

I don't know about you, but, I wouldn't want to be the reason that people felt they couldn't investigate the story of Jesus any further.

Lets put this in the context of Jesus' life. Jesus had a job! We often overlook this fact, as if Jesus somehow didn't have to face the mundane issues with which we have to contend.

One scene in *The Passion of the Christ* shows Jesus as a carpenter making a table. He is depicted as someone who put excellence into whatever He did. Justin Martyr, who lived in Galilee during the second century, made an interesting observation about Jesus' carpentry, saying that he saw farmers who were still using ploughs that Jesus had crafted. Perhaps just a myth.

But let's think about this for just a moment - the 1st century equivalent of an alarm clock would ring, Jesus would get up and head to off to earn his crust. He'd have to deal with suppliers, customers, time wasters and "worst still" his Dad was his boss!

Can you imagine if Jesus was to start his ministry – to preach about the Kingdom of God (maybe on the Sermon of the mount) and there's a long queue of people with their return goods – looking for a refund. In one sense it is comical, but in another it is a deadly serious point.

If Jesus had gone about his work, short changing customers, back stabbing colleagues in the Carpenters union, producing shoddy and counterfeit work the essence of his message would have been lost.

The Jewish establishment, Sanhedrin, the Pharisees and their system of informers were out there – hunting hard for people who had a grudge, a claim, an axe to grind and yet they couldn't find anything. Even after the prosecution had made their case, Pilate could not find him guilty of anything.

I ask myself this – how long would it take for Pilate to find something to pin on me, to find someone who would be willing to stick up their hand and make an accusation that stuck – who would be willing to explain why they believed I hadn't acted with integrity. What about you?

I'll give you another reason why integrity matters. I have been blessed enough to be around people when they have committed their lives to Christ. It's a truly wonderful event to witness. It's great to see someone with the Jesus bug – and in some respects it is like that – it's infectious. They want to tell others about the good news.

But what about our faith – are we still infected? Or has our initial excitement faded. Someone once said that if we only have a mild dose of Christianity. Then all we're doing is inoculating those non-Christians that know us.

Paul took any attempt to undermine his integrity seriously. In 2 Corinthians Paul is forced to defend his integrity. Another group of so called Christians had turned up and were trying to undermine Paul's status as spiritual leader. They were saying he couldn't be trusted – he had changed his plans. By attacking his integrity they were undermining his ministry, the church and, ultimately, the whole gospel. Paul had to stamp on it, and quickly. He would not have been able to do so if the allegations were true.

So – to our third and probably most important aspect of the talk today –

3. How do we go about our business with integrity, particularly in pressure situations like work?

Ian spent a bit of time talking about reading bible and praying. I'm not going to repeat all of that but note that reading the Word of God and spending time in prayer underpin what I'm about to say.

Firstly, we need to take stock of our own situation – and keep on taking stock. Where are we at? I know that this will be different for everyone. Preparing this sermon caused me to reflect on my career in the bank. When I look back on my career in the bank I realise that I created barriers in my own mind. I was convinced that to speak out, to be really clear about where I stood with Christ was the first step towards persecution. A little voice kept telling me that I'd only be singled out as one of those God botherers, a Jesus freak.

This would be sure to hamper my career opportunities and I'd only be overlooked for promotion and the loving, caring Jesus that I know wouldn't want that. In essence, I cared more about what other people thought of me than what God thought about me. Does that ring a bell for anyone here? – Do you fear your colleagues' opinion of you more than you fear God's opinion of you?

When you look at scripture, there is stuff in there about persecution and we tend to home in on it. We thank God that we're not persecuted like some other Christians we read about – in Burma, China. But with one eye on persecution, we don't see the real risk – for those of us here in 21st Century Britain the real risk is assimilation. Ian talked last week about affluenza (a disease where our priority becomes the pursuit of wealth and material belongings). The Bible warns us time and time again about becoming like the world around us about giving in to the ways of the world. James puts it like this – “Don't you realise that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

So were called to be in the world, but not of it.

The Bible is one big story of a people in exile – exile from the promised land, exiled in Egypt, exiled in Babylon,. In Genesis 17:2, God refers to Abram as an alien in the land of Canaan.

We're exiled here - in 21st century Britain. And it's only natural that we'll tending towards the behaviour we see around us. We assimilate – blend in.

I spent a 12 years in a very large banking organisation – I was just another cog in the machine. I spent most of my time with my head down – assimilating – trying to cope in exile. Towards the end of my time there though I did start to step out in faith more and take a few risks – here are a few things that I learned.

I started to realise that the organisation spent a lot of time grooming leaders. We had leadership courses of every shape and size. People pushed themselves forward for one kind of course after another. I started to realise that actually, no-one seemed too keen to be a follower. But when all was said and done, someone needed to get on and do the work. Of course, Jesus calls us first to be followers, to adjust our hearts and to humble ourselves. When you change your perspective and look to become a follower then it's amazing how much easier it is to get along with folks. People realise you're there to help, to move things forward. So actually, taking the time to be a follower of Jesus might just help your career rather than hinder it.

So once we've taken stock of our situation and we've recognised the threat posed by assimilation. What next? What practical steps can we take to begin stepping out in faith, walking blamelessly before God?

Secondly – take responsibility. Don't blame others for your behaviour. I was often of the opinion that I could be a better Christian if it wasn't for the other people I worked with. They would generate a reaction in me. They would make me angry. They would make me think un-Christian thoughts.

I was only being a bad Christian because I had to deal with them.

Then I started to get the picture that the world is full of other people and they're constantly getting between me and being a better Christian. James says "Temptation come from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away" (James 1:14). James is saying don't blame others when it's basically your sinful nature that causes you to sin.

Look at Jesus, he was victimised but he didn't behave like a victim. He was crucified for something he didn't do and he knew it was going to happen. If ever anyone had the right to a real good moaning session – it was Jesus. But Jesus did not go around bad mouthing Judas behind his back even though he knew what he was up to.

He went to the cross without complaint.

Thirdly. Start to realise that your faith is not just about how you feel it's about the **decisions** you make. As good Christians we often pray and consult others about the big decisions, don't we? And that's right – there's nothing wrong with that (which job, which house, which university course, should I get married, baptised and so on).

But often we overlook the small things. We're all familiar with the phrase "the devil is in the detail". Well he's there alright. And he's telling you that these small decisions are not important. But in fact they're very important. You might argue that the everyday decisions are the most important because they paint the real picture of who we are.

Think about a famous painting that you know (most folks have got a favourite – one of mine is Christ of Saint John on the Cross) Although there is a complete image, when you get up close to paintings like these, you start to realise that they're made

up of hundreds and thousands of brush strokes, scrapes of a pallet knife. A huge amount of thought, effort and time has gone into the picture.

To our friends and colleagues watching us, our lives are like that. Made up of thousands of tiny little brush strokes, each one a small decision (whether to take a few pens from the stationery cupboard, whether to exclude someone from a invite, whether to ignore a nuisance at tea break or whether to spend 5 minutes sharing their problems).

Four – Seek support from Christian friends, wherever and however that may be (in the workplace, through the church, online chat rooms, etc.). We've already seen that most folks here either work or have worked. That means that they're having similar experiences to me and to you. Get together, share it, talk about, give advice when you've got it to give and listen to it when you haven't.

Don't overlook some of the more elderly members of the congregation. As the writer of Ecclesiastes says, "there is nothing new under the sun". These folks have lived. Benefit from their experience.

Over the last few weeks we've heard from a few house groups. I have to say that I've been blessed that the house groups I've visited have been a great support in helping me to consider the practical application of my faith. Therefore, I would recommend that you need to get into a house group or some similar support group.

Don't get me wrong - Church on Sunday is great. In fact we're blessed with excellent preachers (Liz, Ian, Alan, Jeremy, Keith and others that have got up to deliver a message). All of them are very good. However, I believe that it will be difficult to grow as a disciple if this is your only spiritual top up.

You're bound to have questions that don't get answered or issues that never seem to be addressed. A house group provides a framework to address these issues and to grow in your understanding and faith.

To those folks who are in house groups, I know that there can be a temptation to get into deep theological debates. We want to understand more about our wonderful Creator. But actually, that can be a self defeating process. Jesus was not drawn into Theological debates. He could have answered our questions but rather He showed us how to live day to day. He showed us how to respond to people and situations around us.

In my experience, I can't think of anyone who was won for Christ through overwhelming Theological debate – but I've seen it happen through simple acts of love, kindness and care. Seeing people live out their beliefs is what demonstrates that the good news is real.

Fifthly– Start to be that little bit bolder about your faith. Trust God. I don't mean that you should march into the Monday morning meeting and tell everyone you're a fool for Christ and you'll only suffer them whilst you're living here as an alien, exiled from the Promised Land. That just might come across as a bit odd. Pray for wisdom to know how to approach it. Consider little touches like leaving a Bible on your desk, wearing a cross or an Ichthus.

You don't have to go in and make a big noise – just a casual response to a question if someone asks you about the weekend– "I was at church".

I find that, in addition to letting people know that I'm there if they want to chat or ask questions, it also helps me to moderate my own behaviour.

Sixthly and Finally – Practice your faith. As my mum used to say “Practice makes perfect”. Looking around, I'm sure there are at least a few folks here who're members of a gym. If you were a fitness fanatic and only went to the gym once a week, you'd soon lose shape or as Lainey points out to me – if I only go once a week I'll never get **in** shape. Well our faith is a bit like that. Integrity is core to our spirituality and spirituality is like a muscle. If we don't exercise it then it starts to waste away. We have to give it the attention it deserves. Use it, or lose it. Exercise your spiritual muscle.

Conclusion

In summary, Will Rogers put it quite well when he said this –“Even if you're on the right track, you'll still get run over if you just sit there”.

Let's learn to keep moving, to walk before God and be blameless. Let's do that together, as a church, recognising our own weakness and forgiving each other for those weaknesses.

House Group Notes – w/c 9th June 2008
Everyday Disciples – Integrity in the workplace

(Readings – Genesis 17:1-8 + 2 Corinthians 2:14-3:60)

Integrity is all about applying values in a consistent manner, regardless of the situation we find ourselves in. We explored some of the key Christian values:-

- Honest
- Fair
- Loving
- Caring
- Sincere
- Moral
- Pure in motive
- Self aware, self reflective

The sermon focussed on the application of these values in a work context although it was recognised that this was also relevant at school, university, lunch club and anywhere else we operate. In the workplace, our integrity can come under greater than normal pressure and the temptation is to start behaving like those people around us.

Christian Integrity is important because the way we live our lives is a reflection on our faith, the message of the gospel and ultimately on Christ himself. The following were proposed as possible strategies to help us to our lives with integrity:-

1. Take stock of our current situation. Do so honestly and prayerfully.
2. Take responsibility for our approach. Don't blame others for our reaction.
3. Start taking every decision seriously, even the small ones.
4. Seek support from fellow Christians.
5. Trust God and be a little bolder in your faith.
6. Practice integrity.

Questions for the house group to explore

1. The above is only a small sample of the values and attitudes we'd expect from someone claiming to be a follower of Christ. Which values are missing from the list? Are there any values which followers of Christ can claim as specific to Christianity?
2. Which Christian values/attitudes are particularly difficult to apply in a work/secular environment? If there are any, why are they difficult?
3. Which situations are the most difficult to deal with (i.e. people gossiping about others at work). What strategies have you developed in order to cope with them?
4. Share any hints or tips that have enabled you to act with integrity under pressure.