

Integrity

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[0 : 00] According to Merriam-Webster, the word integrity is in their top 10 list of the words that people most frequently look for on their website, which indicates that there are a whole lot of people out there who want to know what integrity is, what it means. And as I hear a stat like that, it makes me wonder, is that because integrity is in pretty short supply these days wherever we look. Having integrity basically means that you are willing to do the right thing whether or not there's someone there to witness it. So you're willing to do the right thing even if there's nobody there to see you, to praise you, to affirm you for doing it.

And yet I think there's more to integrity than that. You know, when engineers talk about a building having structural integrity, what they mean is that that building is put together correctly.

All of the parts are aligned properly. And the way that you know if a building has structural integrity is if it's load-bearing. If you stress it and it's able to hold together, it doesn't come apart. And in some ways that's similar to personal integrity. Personal integrity means that we are internally speaking, we are, everything is aligned. Everything is in its place emotionally, psychologically, our beliefs, our values, our morals, even our affections, that they're all aligned properly. And in a similar way, the way we know whether or not we have that kind of internal integrity is if we are load-bearing, so to speak. Under stress, do we come apart? Do we become fragmented? Do we become a completely different person? Or do we hold together? And so integrity is extremely important. In fact, I think that right now, at this moment in our society, with everything going on, I think it, I think I would say that our greatest need as a society is not necessarily to have more smart people or more educated people or more wealthy people or more famous people. I think we need more men and women who have real, true integrity. And so that's what we're going to be talking about this morning. We're going to be looking at Psalm 26, which is one of the Psalms that David wrote. It's one of his prayers. And it's all about integrity. And it shows us three things about integrity. It shows us the aim of integrity. It shows us the context of integrity, the conditions under which integrity grows in our lives. And then lastly, the paradox of integrity.

So the aim of integrity, the context of integrity, and then the paradox of integrity. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we know that as we talk about integrity, we're sort of talking about an internal wholeness. And we recognize off the bat that that's something that has to come through you, Lord, that you are the God who can take broken pieces and broken parts and put them together and make them whole again. And so we pray that as we open your word together, you would do your work in us and make us whole on the inside so that we might become holy, Lord, and pleasing in your sight. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.

So we're talking about integrity. And the first thing that we want to talk about is the aim of integrity. Let me read the opening of this song. Vindicate me, O Lord, for I've walked in my integrity, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering. Prove me, O Lord, and try me. Test my heart and my mind, for your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in your faithfulness. Now, that opening word vindicate could actually also be translated judge, as it sometimes is in the Old Testament. So one of the things that we need to recognize is that David is essentially saying to God, judge me, Lord. Clear my name. Judge me.

[3 : 53] Vindicate me. Vindicate me. Evaluate me. And we need to recognize the significance of the fact that David at this point in history is probably the great king and the greatest king Israel has ever known. He's the most important person in their nation, the most powerful person in their nation.

And in the ancient Near East, oftentimes a nation's king was their God. There was no higher authority, nobody above the king or the emperor. And so here's this great King David, and yet he is humbly submitting himself to God's scrutiny. He's saying, prove me. Try me. Test my mind and my heart. He's saying, don't just test to see whether or not I know your truth and the way I should live, but test my heart. See whether or not I actually love your truth and I love your ways. So in every level, David is asking God to evaluate him. And the assumption under David's words is that there is an objective standard. There is such a thing as God's standard of true and false and right and wrong. There's this objective universal standard under which David places himself and his life. And this standard, David recognizes, is the kind of aim of his life. It's the measure of his life. When David wonders whether or not he's living the way a human being should live, this is the standard that he uses to evaluate himself by. And so as we're talking about integrity, if integrity means doing the right thing, then we need to know what the right thing is as opposed to the wrong thing. And so what we need if we want to have true integrity is we need a standard. We need an objective standard of rightness. You can think of it like a plumb line for our lives, something that shows us whether we are living as we should an upright life or whether we have become crooked in some way, which is one of the ways that we can translate one of the Old Testament words for sin is a kind of bentness or crookedness of the heart. So this standard is that which we should be aiming at in life. There's a book written by C.S.

Lewis called *The Abolition of Man*, which I highly recommend if you've never read it. And in one place in that book, he talks about the fact that before modern times, nearly all religions and all philosophical schools, whether it be Judaism or Christianity or Hinduism or Aristotelianism or Stoicism or Platonism, that all of these various worldviews and schools of thought, they all assumed that there was an underlying natural order to the world. They may differ in some of the details, but they all started with the assumption that there is an underlying natural order to the world, a kind of warp and woof of reality, a natural grain, like you might see wood grain, that reality itself has a kind of grain to it. There's a way that things are meant to work in our world. And so as we think about something like truth, the concept of truth, truth is that which most clearly aligns with and reflects that reality, the grain of reality, how things work. And so if you believe that, as all of these older schools and ways of thinking did, if you believe that, then you can say objectively that certain attitudes are really true and others are false, that it is possible to have our affections aligned correctly toward reality, to respond emotionally in the correct way to certain things, or that we can have a kind of misalignment where we love the wrong things or we hate the wrong things.

And so the aim of integrity along this way of thinking, the aim of integrity is to align our minds and our hearts with that truth, with the truth of reality, to align, to know it and understand it with our minds, and then to love it with our hearts. And so this is most certainly what David has in mind, what the Bible has in mind when it's talking about integrity.

And so the thing that we need to realize is, without this objective truth, without this kind of objective morality, without that sense of rightness or the kind of order of reality that we want to correspond to, without that, true integrity as we see in Scripture is actually impossible, because it has no aim. So what happens when a society rejects the idea of universal objective truth and morality as ours has done in more recent centuries? Well, without truth, we have no aim. And without an aim, we cannot really and truly have integrity as we're talking about here. In such a society that has done away with these things, here's what you see.

[9 : 00] Without objective truth to appeal to, what you see is that the people in power, the people who have political power, the media, the elite academics, the social and cultural influencers, these are the people who now get to define truth. They get to say what is true and what is false. It becomes a power game. In such a society, if you don't have objective morality, what you end up with is a kind of collection of moralities, what you might think of as a kind of moral pluralism, which I would use that phrase to describe our society today. And what you see is that with all of this kind of plurality of moral codes, whoever shouts the loudest really gets to be the one to define right and wrong. Whoever shouts the loudest, whoever does the best job of asserting their morality, they're the ones who get to define the terms of right and wrong. And so what we see is a kind of mob rule morality. And in such a society where these things are true, where you cannot separate truth from spin, and where morality is a kind of ever-changing target that is defined by the mob, defined by whoever's shouting the loudest, what you end up with is you end up with leaders who have no accountability. Because they're the ones who are defining the terms of the conversation. They're the ones who are deciding what is true and what is false, what is right, and what is wrong. So leaders who have no accountability. And then you have people who are doing the right thing, but not because of integrity. You have people who are doing the right thing either because they want to signal their virtue, or that they're doing it out of a kind of grudging conformity. People who are simply trying to keep their head down and to say and to do enough of the right thing in the hopes that the mob might overlook them, that they might not get called out or lose their job or lose all of their credibility in the hopes that they might just be left alone. None of this that we see in our society, none of these are the conditions within which real integrity can emerge. They actually all work against integrity. They erode integrity. They tell you that in order to sort of play the game the way the world works, you can't have integrity. And so the thing is, if we want to walk with integrity, as David talks about here, if we want to walk with true integrity, we have to have an aim.

Our lives have to be aimed at something objective. There has to be an objective standard of truth and of morality, a right way to be in the world. And even if you're a great king, even if you're a great political leader, even if you are on human terms, the highest level of authority, even if you're a great king like David, there has to be a standard above you that you're willing to submit yourself to if you want to have integrity. So that's the first thing, the aim of integrity. We need an aim. But then we also need to talk about the context of integrity. What are the conditions within which integrity can really blossom? And I'll read starting in verse four.

I do not sit with men of falsehood, nor do I consort with hypocrites. I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked. And then we'll go to verse 12. My foot stands on level ground in the great assembly. I will bless the Lord. So the context of integrity, the conditions that make it possible for us to cultivate personal integrity are all found in community. When David says, I don't sit with men of falsehood or consort with hypocrites, I want to make it clear. He's not saying that he has nothing to do with people like that. He's not saying that he just completely removes himself from people like that. Because of course, God has always called his people to love and to serve and to associate with all kinds of people, regardless of who they are or what they believe. What David means here is he's saying, I don't sit with them. I don't consort with them. And that's a kind of biblical way of saying, I don't share their worldview. I don't adopt their beliefs and their values as my own. I might be friends with them. I might spend time with them. I might talk to them. I might interact with them, but I'm not going to adopt their views on reality. I'm not going to adopt their beliefs and values as my own. And instead we see David saying, I want to root myself. I want to stand in the great assembly of people who stand on the level ground of God's word and focus their time and energy on worship and glorifying the name of the Lord. And so David is saying, I might have all of these other relationships, but where I root myself, the community where I really place myself and the people that I call my family, that's the great assembly of people who worship the Lord. And this is a point that I think that we need to emphasize here, that if you want to be the kind of person who has integrity, if you want to cultivate integrity in your own life, you can't do it alone. You need people in your life who have the same aim as you, people who are aiming at the same truth and the same morality that you are. And you need people who want that for themselves. And you need people who also want that for you, where it's understood that that's the point of your friendship and your relationship is not only to enjoy one another, but to help one another grow and cultivate this kind of integrity. And I say that because, you know, it's really tempting. And I have the same temptation as anybody else to surround yourself with, with yes men, to surround yourself with people who will only ever affirm you and support you and validate your choices and who will never call you out or push back against the things that you're doing in your life. And I think these days in our society, a lot of people think that's what it means to be a friend. That if I'm really somebody's friend, I just want them to be happy. And whatever that means for them, I'm just here to support them and be a cheerleader.

And certainly there are some times in any relationship where our role is to support and to be a cheerleader. And of course we want people we love to be happy. But if we are people who take something like integrity seriously, and we recognize the major challenges that we face in trying to become people of integrity, we realize that sometimes we need those who are closest to us to be honest with us, to speak truth to us, to challenge us, to push back against us, to help us ensure that we are pursuing that aim and that we're not deceiving ourselves. And so we need to surround ourselves with people who will point us toward truth, even if it's painful, even if it's offensive, even if we want to close our ears and not hear it. We need friends who will speak that kind of truth into our lives anyway.

Dr. Henry Cloud has written a book called Integrity, which is all about this. And in that book, he actually includes an interview. And if you want to see the full interview, you should get the book and read it. It's an excellent book. But in that book, he has this interview and he says, he suggests that you take this interview and that you go to somebody that you trust and you give them these questions and let them read through all the questions. And then he says that you should invite that person to answer those questions about you. And he says that you should sit and listen to the answers, not try to justify yourself, not try to defend yourself, and that you should also take notes and recognize that this is incredibly valuable and rare feedback that you can get from somebody who really knows you.

[16 : 52] And so some of the questions are, so imagine sitting with somebody that you trust, who really knows you, and asking them, what's it like to be on the other end of me? How do you feel after spending an hour with me or a day with me? What state do I leave you in? Or asking a question like, what is my net impact on social settings? When I'm in a group setting and I leave, what is my impact on that group? Or what subjects do you think might trigger my defenses? Are there any topics or things that I, that you know you can't bring up because I might become defensive? Or what are the things that you think I struggle to see about myself? The last one is the best, I think. After you've asked all of these other questions, you say, now I want you to give me the last 10% of your answers that you're holding back. I want you to give it all to me. And I can tell you from personal experience, I've done this full interview with people before in my life. And I can tell you it is terrifying. You feel completely vulnerable and exposed. It's terrifying, but at the same time, it is incredibly life-giving.

It's incredibly life-giving. And it helps you ensure that there are no blind spots that are causing you to live in a state of self-deception where you're really not able to have that kind of honesty and integrity that you're seeking. So that's the context of integrity. Having a community of people around you who share your values, who share your aim in life, who want to have integrity themselves, and who want you to have integrity. And they'll be true friends toward that end in your life.

Now, the last thing we want to look at briefly is the paradox of integrity, because there is a kind of paradox here as we talk about as Christians, what it means to have integrity. One of the things that immediately jumps out when you read Psalm 26 is the fact that David seems to be so utterly sure of his own excellence. And the first few times I read through this Psalm, I was struck by that.

David seems like a kind of self-righteous jerk at first glance. He says, I've walked in my integrity and I've trusted in the Lord without wavering. And so he says this, and yet we know from scripture that David was anything but perfect, right? This is before the internet. This is before you could sort of say or do the wrong thing. And all of a sudden it was all over the internet and all over the newspapers and everybody was talking about it. Almost nothing was getting written down. So anything that got written down was extremely important. And so when the scriptures were first being written down on clay tablets or on pieces of papyrus, you know, there was somebody somewhere said, man, we should really write down that horrible thing that David did, right? So it was written down for all posterity. Here we are thousands of years later. And when you bring up David, people still think about his affair with Bathsheba. People still think and talk about the fact that he had his best friend Uriah killed to cover up his affair, right? So David's sin is very well known all throughout history. So the question is, how do we make sense of David's tone and David's confidence in a Psalm like Psalm 26? And when you read the other Psalms and when you read the larger corpus of scripture, you begin to understand how to make sense of it. This brings us to the paradox of integrity. Part of having integrity, if you think about what we just said, part of integrity means having an aim. There's an objective standard of right and wrong of truth and fiction. There's an objective standard of how to live and we aim at that. That's part of what it means to have integrity. But the other piece about integrity is that it means we have to be totally honest about who we are. That's why we need community, people who are willing to speak truth to us. We have to be totally honest about who we are, including our shortcomings. And every single one of us, if we're honest, we have to admit that even though we have this aim over here, that because of who we really are, we will never fully reach that aim. We will always fall short. And that's the paradox of integrity. Integrity means having and living and aiming our lives toward an ideal that we can never achieve. Aiming at an ideal that we can never achieve. And as we said, most religions and philosophies in history have agreed that there is a basic natural order to the world, a kind of right way to live in the world. But when it comes to this hard truth, that human beings will inevitably fail and fall short, most of the religions and the philosophies in the world don't really have much to say other than, well, try harder. Or hopefully you have enough successes to outweigh the failures in your life. And that's pretty much it. And this is where

Christianity begins to pull away from all of the rest and begins to emerge as being utterly unique. There's nothing like the Christian gospel anywhere else in the world. How does David resolve this paradox? Here's my ideal and here's the fact that I'm never going to reach it. How does he deal with his own sin? How can he have such confidence coming to the Lord knowing that he's such a sinner in his heart? And you see it right here in the very end of the psalm, David says to God in verse 11, but as for me, I shall walk in my integrity, just like you said at the beginning of the psalm. But then he adds this, redeem me and be gracious to me. Redeem me and show me your grace. Grace means give me what I don't deserve, God. Give me what I can't earn from you. Give me that which I could never repay, even if I spent the rest of my life trying. Be gracious to me. David's integrity is not based in his own excellence. He knows he'll never attain the standard. It's based in the fact that God is a God of grace and mercy. David says, I trust fully in your love, your steadfast love. I trust fully in your faithfulness. So just as he says,

[23 : 12] I walk in your integrity, he also says a little bit later in the psalm, I walk in your faithfulness. What's he talking about there? Well, there's only one human being who could ever fully live up to God's standard, who could ever have that aim in his life and fully meet it, exceed it. In fact, there's only one person who ever attained a perfect life of truth and goodness. And that person is Jesus Christ. Jesus came in order to redeem people like David, in order to redeem people like you and me.

Jesus came to live the life that we should have lived, right? To meet that aim, to succeed where we fail. And once he had lived the life that we should have lived, fulfilled all that God required of his people, Israel, all that God desires for human beings everywhere. Once Jesus has fulfilled that, then he gave his life. So he lived the life that we should have lived. And then he gave his life and died the death that we deserve to die because we did fall short. But because Jesus did that, instead of us, he offers us the opportunity to take his place. So not only is he able and willing to atone for, to pay for all of our sin, all the ways that we fall short, past, present, and future, but he's also willing to give us his righteousness, his rightness, the inherent value and worth of the life that he has lived becomes ours. And so when God redeems a person, he takes their sin away, and he also gives to them the righteousness of Christ. It becomes ours. And so for Christians, integrity isn't about being perfect. It's not about signaling our virtue. It's not about asserting our excellence over other people. It has nothing to do with that. It's about being willing to admit that yes, there is a standard that God desires for all of his people because he loves us and because he made us to live a certain way in this world, that there is that standard. And yet we can also admit boldly that we fall short of that standard. And we can do that because we walk in the love and the truth of Jesus Christ. And we trust Jesus to be the one to deal with our sin and to give us the righteousness that we don't deserve, didn't earn, and could never repay because he is gracious in his very being.

And then we trust that as we do that, God will test us and God will try us in heart and mind, and God will refine us and God will form us more and more and more into the men and the women that God created us to be. Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for the work that you're doing in us even now. And I pray, as Paul prayed, that Lord, you would bring to completion the good work that you have begun in us. And I pray that for any here who desire to have integrity, to be men and women of integrity, Lord, I pray that that would come not only through our understanding of your word, but through the work and the power of the Holy Spirit in us, doing what only you can do.

We pray this for our good and for your glory. In your Son's name. Amen.