

Sunday 3rd May 2026 - Values: Integrity

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Date: 03 May 2026

Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Full house today. Nice to see you all. Well done. Well done. And if you don't know me, my name's Matt, the vicar here. And we're doing a new series that we started last week. We're in the second week of a Sunday series called Values.

And it's a series in which we're exploring who we want to be as a church under God, you know, the values we hold in order for these values to then shape, hopefully, what we do as a church.

However, these values are very much aspirations, a process of becoming rather than something that we think we've already arrived at, if that makes sense.

And so last week we started by looking at the value of humility. And feel free to catch up with that online if you missed it. But this week we're going to look at a different but connected value, that of integrity. Integrity.

Now what is integrity? Well there are various ways to define it, but at its heart it seems it's about being honest and ethical and consistent.

[1 : 11] As such it's a matter of choice. Something that author and speaker Brené Brown picks up on when she describes and defines integrity like this.

She says integrity is choosing courage over comfort, choosing what is right over what is fun, fast or easy, and choosing to practice our values rather than simply professing them.

Integrity, therefore, we might say is about walking the walk as well as talking the talk so that our actions match our words. Something which I think we could argue is more important than ever, given the corruption, the misinformation, the spin, and sadly the lies that often characterize so much of our public and our political life these days.

So that's Brené Brown's definition of integrity. But if you Google integrity, another definition that crops up is this one.

That integrity is doing the right thing even when no one is watching. Kind of indicating that integrity is about our private life matching our public life.

[2 : 31] Now this definition here is often associated with this guy, C.S. Lewis. But there's actually no record of him ever saying or writing this, which is kind of ironic perhaps when you're thinking about integrity and being truthful and all that.

Indeed, I'd be surprised if C.S. Lewis ever did say this or even believed it, because as a person of faith, he'd probably want to push back on the idea that there is ever a time in our lives when no one is watching.

Because the whole idea of the Spirit of God being with us is that we are always in the presence, the company of God. Where can I go from your Spirit, says the psalmist, with of course the assumption being nowhere.

Where can we go? Nowhere from God's Spirit. God's Spirit is everywhere with us. And for some people, I guess the idea of an all-seeing, all-knowing God, that might be a pretty intimidating, even scary thought for us.

And I guess it would be if we felt that God was someone we couldn't trust. You know, a God who was against us, not for us. A God who constantly is looking to criticize or condemn us for the ways our walk doesn't match our talk or our private life doesn't match our public life.

[4 : 09] In fact, in Jesus' day, I suspect that that was what religious groups like the Pharisees felt deep down. You know, afraid of God and I suspect ashamed of themselves, fear and shame, which caused them to lash out in condemnation of others in order to somehow feel better about themselves.

And yet it's interesting. It's that the Pharisees and perhaps their fear-based, shame-based view of God and people that Jesus seemed to reject most strongly of all.

And why was that? Well, because fear and shame lead to a life not of integrity, but often of hypocrisy, where we try to pretend we're better than we are in order to protect ourselves from being found out.

You know, all that's if the idea of an all-seeing, all-knowing God feels like a bad thing. However, if we can learn to see God's all-seeing, all-knowing presence with us instead as a good thing, because we trust that God will always love us no matter what, then God's closeness to us won't intimidate us.

Nah. Instead, it will inspire us because we want to live a life of integrity. Indeed, it's inspiration, not intimidation, that will help us to live honest, ethical, consistent lives.

[5 : 45] We might say righteous lives. And that, I think, is why Jesus says, as part of his Sermon on the Mount, he says this, I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

So true righteousness, true integrity, we might say. It's not about religion. You know, intimidated into keeping up an outward appearance out of fear or shame.

Rather true righteousness. Righteousness, which surpasses that, is all about relationship. A life of integrity inspired by the fact that our loving God is with us, and we therefore want to live well because of that relationship.

Yes, we may not always manage to get things right, but the good news about relationship, not religion, is that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because even when we do muck up and fail to live with integrity, as we all will do from time to time, God's love for us remains constant and forgiveness and a fresh start is always possible.

I could say, therefore, that consistent, honest, ethical living, you know, far from being boring, actually becomes an adventure, becomes a goal, an aspiration, a value, a longing to please God, not because we're afraid of the consequences if we don't, but because we know God loves us and we're simply responding to that love.

[7 : 29] That, for Jesus, is what it means to enter the kingdom of God, to experience the loving, holy, heavenly presence of God with us here on earth in both public and personal ways.

That's the theory, at least. But how do we actually do it? How might we be inspired to live lives of integrity, both as individuals and as a church?

Well, I think as with all of these values that we're exploring over these weeks, a model for what they mean and look like is the life and person of Jesus, because it's in him we see the best example of consistency between the walk and the talk, between the public and the personal.

Now, for Jesus, his integrity, it seems, was rooted in the fact that he was completely at one with and comfortable in the company of God, the one he called Father.

So we hear him saying things like this, that I and the Father are one. It's a bold statement, but a true statement, totally consistent in character, in mind, and in spirit.

[8 : 53] So much so that Jesus could declare that anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. Jesus' conduct matched God's character and vice versa.

And so we think about how Jesus conducted himself, whether it was speaking to large crowds or in one-on-one conversations, whether he's sat at a dinner table or standing in the temple, whether he's wandering in the wilderness or drinking wine at a wedding, whether spending time with men or women, adults or children, rich or poor, Jesus is the epitome of consistency.

He's the incarnation of integrity. The one who, more than anyone else who has ever lived, practiced what he preached. So how might we follow that example of lives of consistent integrity?

Well, there are all sorts of ways, but I just want to suggest two in particular this morning, two hopefully practical but key ways through which God can help us live this life of integrity.

Let's call them little things and little moments. So firstly, little things. Because actually it seems little things are central to the way in which Jesus describes how God is at work in our lives and in the world.

[10 : 28] So you might recall, Jesus says on various occasions, the kingdom of God is like something incredibly small, maybe a mustard seed or a pearl or yeast, or that if we want to enter God's kingdom, we must become like a child.

You know, all images that speak of the importance of small beginnings, but out of which great things can grow. And why might this be? Well, again, as Jesus says, whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much.

We get the little things, the small things right, and the big stuff will follow. So what might the little things be for us? Well, a bit of a left field example perhaps this morning, but I've been struck recently by the example of a French nun who was born 150 years ago.

It's this lady here, Therese of Lisieux. I think you say it, Therese of Lisieux. You may know of her, especially if you've got a Catholic background. She's a very famous saint in the Catholic Church. How did she get this fame, this reputation? Well, she wasn't long lived. Indeed, she died aged just 24 from tuberculosis.

[11 : 53] And during her short life, no one really took much notice of her. The other nuns in the convent, they nicknamed her the little flower because she lived such a quiet, unassuming life.

However, what she did do was write. Writings that were only really shared and then published after she died. And yet these writings revealed her to be someone who always sought to do little things with great love.

For example, part of her everyday mundane duties in the convent was to lay the table for dinner. But Therese wrote this.

She said, if I'm going to fold a napkin, I'm going to do that with great love because perhaps Jesus himself might come to dinner.

It didn't matter for Therese that maybe no one noticed the care that she took in folding these napkins. I don't know if she made little swan figures out of them or anything. I don't know how she folded them.

[13 : 05] But she knew that God saw. And she was doing it for an audience of one. And that knowledge enabled her to see that even the smallest of actions could become an act of devotion and worship, an act of integrity.

I think she lived by the truth of these words from Ephesians. And that's why she said, we're encouraged to serve wholeheartedly as if you were serving the Lord, not people.

Therese herself later wrote, love proves itself by deeds. So how am I to show my love? Great deeds have forbidden me.

The only way I can prove my love is by scattering flowers. And these flowers are every little sacrifice, every glance and word, and the doing of the least actions for love.

After she died, a movement grew called The Little Way, a spiritual approach to life that sees the value in living with integrity, you know, seeing even the smallest acts as opportunities to connect with God and live a life of consistent love.

[14 : 27] Indeed, such was her influence that Mother Teresa chose to be named after her, saying this, saying, I chose Teresa as my namesake because she did ordinary things with extraordinary love.

And I wonder for us, I wonder for you, what are the ordinary things you do in life but over which you take great care?

Because I bet there are plenty. I bet there are plenty. Could be the thought that goes into making your child's packed lunch, you know, making sure the cheese spread goes to the edge of the bread before cutting the sandwich into triangles or some other funky shapes or whatever because that just feels a bit more thoughtful, a bit more special for them.

Could be the considerate way in which you put your neighbor's bin back each week, even if you never get a word of thanks. Could be the quiet way you wash other people's cups up in the kitchen at work.

Could be the way you remember to message someone on the anniversary of their husband's death. You know, ordinary things, small things, done with extraordinary love.

[15 : 48] I know for me, I'm not great at this but there are things I like to do that at least aspire to this little way.

So for me, and I'm slightly bashful to admit this but I will, I'll be bold, I'll go for it. I like to feed the birds in our garden, all right, yes. But when I feed them, I try to ensure that there's a range of options, a nice buffet for the birds.

So sunflower hearts, mealworms, songbird mix, all that kind of stuff. Because I hate to think of a hungry bird coming to the feeders and not seeing anything that they like the look of that day.

It's the same with a can fridge, to be honest. I like us to stock a range of options so that every person who comes to have a drink thinks, oh yeah, I fancy that today. And by the way, the door is slightly open on the can fridge.

If you want to nudge that there, we'll keep them chilled. Not that I'm a pedant or anything, but thank you. Little things done with great care.

[16:54] It doesn't matter to me if the birds recognize the variety of seeds. They certainly don't know it's me who's put them out. I don't mind if visitors don't clock the range of cans we have.

I know those things have been offered in love and the fact that God sees the birds, the cans, whatever. That's enough. That's enough. And I suspect that that is probably what integrity is all about or at least partly where it starts.

Doing ordinary things with extraordinary love, whether in public or in private. That's what we see demonstrated in the life of Jesus. And that's why integrity, this consistent, honest, ethical living is such a key value for us to aspire to live by.

You see, thinking more broadly, you know, for us as a church, yes, we might aspire to do great things for our community and we might long to make a big difference in the world.

but as decent and as admirable as those aspirations might be, I don't think that big or bold is necessarily beautiful.

[18:10] Instead, I'd suggest that for us to do truly great things, indeed, the way for us perhaps to be most effective in sharing the love of Jesus is by consistently doing little, ordinary, quiet, acts of love.

So, for example, you know, the care which is taken when games are chosen for games club to get a variety for the people who come, the care with which cakes are baked for dropping or toys are laid out for little friends, the smile with which we welcome people through our doors regardless of whether they're coming for a service on a Sunday or Slimming World on a Monday, the meals that I know are cooked and delivered for those who are poorly the quiet prayers for those in need, the attentive way that people are listened to, the way we might pick up litter on our streets, maybe even scoop up the poop from someone else's dog or give away our money rather than keep it for ourselves.

You know, when added together, all these little things, these little seeds, they make the biggest of differences, ordinary things done with extraordinary love.

That's the kind of people I believe God wants us to be. That's the kind of church I want us to be. A church that knows the importance of little things for living with integrity and trusts God to take these small seeds of love and grow his kingdom from them.

little things. Maybe think about what they might be in your life. But then secondly, there's the importance of little moments too.

[20:04] What do I mean by this? Well, I think it's a way of slowing down in order to appreciate that God is with us in the present, in this moment, in a beautifully unique way that has never happened before and will never be repeated again.

For example, another person to illustrate stuff. Let's talk about this guy. This is Hiroataka Hamasaki. He's a Japanese high school teacher who creates stunning blackboard artworks for his students. He uses chalk to draw everything from Van Gogh masterpieces to modern anime icons. A whole range of beautiful displays simply for his students to enjoy and be inspired by.

And he's obviously an incredibly gifted artist. But what makes his creations so unique is that each day he does a different one.

But then at the end of the day he wipes the board clean. As stunning as they are, these artworks are erased soon after they're drawn and they're gone for good.

[21:31] And we might think, what a shame. That's pretty tragic really. Could we not keep them and put them in a gallery or something? What a waste of time and talent maybe. And yet for Hirataka the fleeting nature of these artworks is the whole point.

As he wants his students to appreciate the beauty of impermanence and of letting go in order to experience something new.

The temporary fleeting nature of the art doesn't mean it hasn't been a beautiful thing. Rather, it's an encouragement to keep looking for and expecting to find beauty in each little present moment.

Now, I don't know what you make of this idea, but for me, I think it's pointing to a truth that we see lived out in the life of Jesus. You see, Jesus is the one who teaches us to pray, give us today our daily bread.

In other words, give us what we need to live today, not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today. Equally, Jesus encourages us to not worry about tomorrow, but to instead focus on the present, aware of

God being with us in this moment of time.

[22 : 57] And why might this be important? Well, because if we're able to see every moment as being pregnant with potential for being a sacred encounter, then that will help us live lives of consistent, expectant integrity, because every moment is precious, every moment matters.

So again, I wonder for you, what might these little moments in your life look like? Might just be a second or two, a minute perhaps in a day, but these moments matter because perhaps you sense God in a special way in them.

Temporary moments of tenderness, maybe, moments that may not last, but moments nevertheless which rekindle our hope in goodness and in beauty and in joy.

So these moments could be taken a second when we first open the curtains in the morning to see the sky and thank God for a new day. Could be taking a moment before each meal to be grateful to God for our food.

Could be pausing to admire a shop window display, not because you want to buy something from it, but to say that's done really well, that's done really well. Could be stopping by a building to admire its architecture, could be listening to a song purely for the appreciation of its melody, thanking God for the creativity that he's nurtured in people.

[24 : 29] could be hearing children playing in the park and giving thanks to God that he sees in them the secret of his kingdom. Could be looking around church, as I said the other week, and quietly saying thank you to God for the sheer range of people who we've been given by God to do this life with.

God to wonder what your little moments might be. Because if we can get in the habit of asking God, all right God, what are you doing in this moment here?

What do you want me to see of you right now? Then I'd suggest that can be a key way in which we might grow in consistent living because we know God is with us in every moment of our lives.

And that's not intended to add pressure to us. Rather it's intended to see every moment as potentially precious. Precious, not pressured.

A gift from God in which we might experience his company, his care, his compassion. And slowly but surely I think as we see each moment as potentially precious, then those moments soon add up to become a lifetime lived with God.

[25 : 53] Which sounds pretty good to me. And it won't be much longer. But I think for us as a church, that means that every time we gather, whether for worship or groups or friendship, it has the potential to be a place of encounter.

A time in which God is offering a new way for us to experience his presence and receive his love. As I say, there's an expectancy that comes with that. But also a desire for integrity too.

As we won't want any of our thoughts or our words or our deeds to get in the way of us or other people being able to know the fullness of God's love in our lives in that moment.

Again, as with little things, these little moments, they for me define the type of church I want us to be, the kind of church I want to be a part of.

Not a church of hype or formula or emotional manipulation, but of genuine, expectant encounter rooted in the knowledge that God is with us and he's doing a new thing each moment of each day.

[27 : 07] And especially in the times we're living in, you know, in our media and our politics, when there's so much that depresses us and feels lacking in integrity, so much that is corrupt and violent and divisive and oppressive, it can feel pretty overwhelming knowing how I respond or take a stand in the face of so much that seems wrong.

And yet, what gives me hope and what prompts this desire to make integrity one of our key values as a church is the way in which we see Jesus model for us what a life of integrity looks like.

Yes, we have a responsibility to make or take opportunities to challenge the systems in our society which lack integrity, but when we look at Jesus, we see someone who did this through a life of small things and small moments which in turn became a movement with the ability to change communities and ultimately change our world.

The kingdom of God is grown from seeds, little things, little moments, sown in love and nurtured in faith. And it's those seeds which we are called to sow in every moment and in every way in our lives so that the ways of God can grow in our world.

world. One final quote and I'll finish with these words from the priest and theologian Richard Rohr who says this.

[28 : 50] He says, the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better. That's as true for us in our private lives as it is in our public conduct and practicing the better is really what a life of integrity is all about.

So may this value of integrity become ever more a part of our story as individuals and as a church. Amen. Amen. Just, I don't often get this kind of sense but I felt compelled to share just another little bit.

Just as we've been singing and worshipping and praying, I get a sense when we're talking about integrity that if we feel that elements of our lives are kind of falling apart and there's big stuff that is overwhelming because it feels like we might have mucked up beyond that which is possible to be saved or redeemed or something.

My sense is, if that's you, if that's us, that the encouragement from God is that he sees it all anyway. He knows what we've done or not done.

[30 : 17] But the encouragement is, if we're particularly feeling overwhelmed at the enormity perhaps of what we feel needs repairing, could be in our relationships, could be in a marriage, could be in friendships, could be in our work, then start with the small things.

Start by trying to get the small things right with God and the bigger stuff will take shape from that. Does that make sense? In particular, if you're in a relationship and it's going wrong, it feels, I suspect perhaps the way to allow God's grace and love to reshape it is to start afresh by doing the small things for each other with love.

And then that will help the bigger stuff find a renewed hope in that. So if that's for you, take that away.

If it's not, just let it wash over you. But I just wanted to share that today, but we'll continue with another song. Thank you. Hallelujah, our God reigns.

Hallelujah, our God reigns. Hallelujah, our God reigns forever, all my days.

[32 : 05] Hallelujah.