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A LIFE OF INTEGRITY

Acts 24:1-23

By

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Acts Lesson 62

A Life of Integrity Acts 24:1-23

Years ago, 20th Century-Fox advertised for a salesman and got this reply from an applicant:

I am at present selling furniture at the address below. You may judge my ability as a salesman if you will stop in to see me at any time, pretending that you are interested in buying furniture. When you come in you can identify me by my red hair. And I will have no way of identifying you. Such salesmanship as I exhibit during your visit, therefore, will be no more than my usual workaday approach, and not a special effort to impress a prospective employer ("Bits & Pieces" [3/85]).

I don't know if that young man got the job, but he demonstrated a quality that is rare, although it shouldn't be—integrity. It's easy to talk about integrity. In a 1980 *Sports Illustrated*, a well-known athlete said, "Fame is a vapor, popularity is an accident and money takes wings. The only thing that endures is character." That was O. J. Simpson speaking!

But talking about character and living it are two different things. When we find a man whose life radiates integrity, we should pause and learn from him. The apostle Paul was such a man. In his defense before Felix to the charges that the Jewish leaders brought against him, Paul proclaimed his integrity by saying, "I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men" (24:16). But he not only proclaimed his integrity; he lived it. The proof of Paul's integrity is the great impact he has had on so many down through the centuries.

Luke contrasts Paul's integrity with the glaring lack of integrity of a certain lawyer, Tertullus, who was willing, for a fee, to take up the Jewish leaders' slanderous accusations against Paul. And, although Luke does not say anything derogatory against the Roman governor, Felix, it was common knowledge that he was a scoundrel. I will deal more with him next week, but for now I will say that he was a slave who gained his freedom and rose to power

through his connections. The historian, Tacitus, described Felix as one who reveled in cruelty and lust, and wielded the power of a king with the mind of a slave. His rule over Palestine was marked by unrest and turmoil. He dealt with insurrection by crucifying hundreds of rebels. If Tertullus could convince Felix that this renegade Paul was a seditious man, it would not bother Felix's conscience in the least to crucify him or lop off his head.

And so we have here a man of integrity up against a lawyer, a group of Jewish leaders who had tried to assassinate him, and a governor who notoriously lacked integrity. Paul teaches us that ...

We can live with integrity by speaking the truth, by living in line with Scripture, and by keeping a blameless conscience before God and men.

Before we look at these factors, we need to take to heart another lesson that is evident from our text:

*A life of integrity does not shield us from being falsely accused.

If this world were made up of basically good people, a man of integrity would be well loved and have no enemies. But since this world is made up of sinners who love darkness rather than light, and since a life of integrity exposes their evil deeds, sinners will often slander the man of integrity. We are naïve if we think that if we live with integrity, we will be protected from false accusations and slanderous attempts to bring us down.

In 24:1-9, Tertullus presents his shaky case against Paul. Nearly half of his speech consists of his obvious flattery toward Felix. It is one thing to be polite towards the one in authority; Paul does that (24:10). But Tertullus' flattery goes so far beyond credulity that probably Felix himself was thinking, "Come on! We all know that you're lying. Get on with your case!" Tertullus promises to be brief, as if to say, "This case is a no-brainer! Just grant us what we ask by getting rid of this pesky fellow and we can all get on with more important matters."

He brings three charges against Paul. Although the Jewish leaders' main gripe was religious, they knew that religious charges would not get far with the Roman governor. Rome took charges of political unrest seriously, and if Paul were guilty of sedition, he

could be executed. So they framed the first two charges in terms of political sedition: (1) Paul was a plague, spreading unrest among the Jews throughout the empire. (2) He was a ringleader of a heretical sect that was not recognized as a legitimate religion by the Roman government. And, (3) since he had tried to desecrate the Jewish temple by taking a Gentile beyond the Court of the Gentiles, Rome should hand him over to the Jews to execute him. Rome had granted the Jews that right, even if the Gentile in question was a Roman citizen (Richard Longenecker, *Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Zondervan], 9:522).

Tertullus' strategy was to hope that, based on the Jews' testimony, Felix would act in his usual insensitive manner and have Paul executed (*ibid.*, p. 540). Tertullus flatly lies when he states that the Jews arrested Paul in the act of trying to desecrate the temple (24:6). The fact was, the Jews mobbed Paul with the intent to kill him, but the Roman commander intervened to save his life. But in spite of such blatant falsehood, all of the Jews joined his attack, asserting that the charges against Paul were true (24:9).

The best manuscripts omit verse 6b through 8a. The addition of these sentences would have Tertullus complain against Lysias' intervention, and would urge Felix to examine Lysias' testimony. The exclusion would urge Felix to examine Paul's testimony. Probably the words in brackets were not original (Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [United Bible Societies], 2nd ed., p. 434). Thus Tertullus is telling Felix that if he examines Paul, he will find him to be the liar that he really is.

The application is to keep in mind that living with integrity does not shield us from being falsely accused. Read the Psalms to see how often David was slandered. Remember that he is often a type of the Lord Jesus Christ, who was without sin and yet was constantly slandered. You could probably state it as a rule: the more godly the man, the more he will be slandered!

With that in mind, let's look at three factors that went into Paul's integrity:

1. We can live with integrity by speaking the truth in every situation.

Paul's integrity enabled him to give a calm, straightforward reply to the accusations against him. He lived openly before God and men, and thus he didn't have to weave a tale of half-truths or misleading statements to defend himself. He simply spoke the truth, refuting each of the charges in order.

To the charge of stirring up sedition, Paul pointed to the facts. It had only been 12 days since he went up to Jerusalem to worship. Although it is debated as to when the starting point was of Luke's "after five days" (24:1), Paul's irrefutable argument is that he simply had not had time to stir up sedition, as his accusers had charged. Furthermore, his purpose in going to Jerusalem was not to stir up the crowds, but to worship. Thus he had not preached or even carried on a group discussion in the temple, nor in synagogues, nor anywhere in the city (24:12). His accusers could not prove their first charge.

Regarding the second charge, of being the ringleader of a heretical sect, Paul did not deny his commitment to the Christian faith, which he calls "the Way," but he denies that it is a heretical Jewish sect. He affirms his full belief in everything written in the Law and the Prophets (the entire Old Testament). He also affirms the Jewish hope (denied by the Sadducee wing of his accusers) "that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked" (Dan. 12:2; John 5:28). This is the only time that Paul explicitly states that the wicked will be raised for judgment. Paul is saying that as a Christian, he was acting as a true Jew, in line with the Hebrew Scriptures. Felix would have missed it, but Paul is also taking a swipe at his Sadducee accusers, implying that it was *they* that were the Jewish heretics. In denying the resurrection, they denied their own Scriptures.

Regarding the third charge, that he had desecrated the temple, Paul pointed out that his reason for coming to Jerusalem was to bring alms to his nation and to present offerings. "Offerings" may be a repetition of "alms," referring to his gift that he had collected from the Gentiles for the poor Jewish believers. Or, it may refer to the offerings that he was about to offer in connection with the vows of the young men. But his point is that he had come to Jerusalem for noble purposes and had gone through the ritual purification. As he was going about his business, certain Jews from Asia who recognized him stirred up the crowd against him.

By pointing out that his accusers should have been present (24:19), Paul was raising a point of Roman law, which imposed heavy penalties on accusers who abandoned their charges. "The disappearance of accusers often meant the withdrawal of a charge" (Longenecker, p. 541). Paul concludes by pointing out that the only supposed misdeed that any of his accusers had against him was his statement of being on trial before them because of his belief in the resurrection of the dead. So Paul answered his accusers by speaking the truth.

Being a person who consistently speaks the truth is a freeing concept! If you're in the spin business, of making yourself look better than you really are, then you have to remember what you said to whomever, and hope that those you're trying to impress don't start comparing notes. But if your life is a single fabric and you habitually speak the truth, you don't have to worry about what you said to whomever. You just speak truth to everyone!

Earl Long, a former governor of Louisiana, once said of another politician: "You know how you can tell that fellow is lying? Watch his lips. If they're moving, he's lying." I'm sure that all of you were, as I was, disturbed several years ago when our former President looked straight at the camera and told us with great vehemence that he had *not* had sex with "that woman." But what bothered me even more was that when it came out that he had even lied about this under oath, the majority of our political leaders and the majority of Americans polled shrugged it off as if it didn't really affect his ability to govern our nation!

As Christians, we are commanded to speak the truth (Eph. 4:25). The devil is the father of lies (John 8:44), but God is the God of truth, who cannot lie (Titus 1:1-2). Jesus Christ claimed that He is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one can come to the Father, except through Him (John 14:6). As His followers, we must become people who speak the truth in every situation.

A small boy was on the witness stand in an important lawsuit. The prosecuting attorney cross-examined him and then delivered what he thought would be a crushing blow to the boy's testimony. "Your father has been telling you how to testify, hasn't he?"

"Yes," the boy quickly replied.

“Now,” said the attorney triumphantly, “just tell us how your father told you to testify.”

“Well,” the boy said modestly, “Father told me the lawyers would try to tangle me in my testimony, but if I would just be careful to tell the truth, I could repeat the same thing every time.” (Author unknown.) Well said!

2. We can live with integrity by living in line with Scripture.

Paul asserts his obedience to Scripture when he tells Felix that he served “the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law, and that is written in the Prophets” (24:14). Becoming a Christian for Paul did not in any way mean jettisoning the Old Testament. When he wrote, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16), Paul was referring mostly to the Old Testament, since the New Testament was not yet widely recognized and accepted as Scripture.

While the Old Testament must be properly interpreted in light of its fulfillment in Jesus Christ and in light of the transition from law to grace, we would greatly err if we set it aside as irrelevant or impractical. While the Jewish ceremonial laws were fulfilled in Christ and are set aside under the New Covenant, God’s moral law stems from His holy character and is always our standard for godly living. Being under grace never means setting aside God’s moral law. We will grow in integrity and godly living only as we grow to know and understand all of God’s Word of truth.

3. We can live with integrity by keeping a blameless conscience before God and men.

In light of Paul’s hope in God and in light of the certainty of the resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked, Paul sought to maintain always a blameless conscience before God and before men. The concept of maintaining a good conscience is an important one in Scripture. Paul later tells Timothy, “But the goal of our instruction [lit., “commandment”] is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5). He tells Timothy to keep faith and a good conscience, warning him that some have rejected these qualities and suffered shipwreck in regard to their

faith (1 Tim. 1:19). So it is crucial for us to understand what it means to maintain a good conscience and to practice it daily.

I offer this definition of what it means to live with a blameless conscience: *In the light of Scripture and the coming judgment, we examine our hearts and are not aware of any sin of thought, word, or deed that we have not confessed and turned from; or of any person that we have wronged and not sought to make it right.* Consider these four aspects:

(1) We need to inform our consciences by God's Word.

Because of the fall of the human race, the conscience by itself is not a safe guide. Jesus told the disciples that the day would come when those who killed them would think that they were offering a service to God (John 16:2). His words applied to these Jewish leaders who sought to kill Paul. Paul himself had once thought that he was serving God by persecuting Christians. If we compare ourselves with others, rather than with Scripture, we can conclude that we're doing okay. But God's Word penetrates like a sword down into our innermost being, judging the thoughts and intentions of our hearts, laying us bare in God's holy presence (Heb. 4:12-13). So we must grow in our understanding of God's standards as revealed in His Word.

I had a humorous illustration of this in the church I pastored in California. My associate pastor was standing in line in a convenience store behind a man who had just started attending the church. This new guy, who was not from a Christian background, was buying a six-pack of beer and \$5 worth of lottery tickets. The cashier only charged him \$1 for the lottery tickets. He pointed out her error and then turned and said to my associate, "After Steve's sermon, what else could I do? I *have* to be honest!"

Hopefully after he grew to know God's Word, he would get convicted about his drinking and gambling, but at least he knew that he needed to be honest!

(2) We need to live before God on the heart level, confessing and turning away from every wrong thought, motive, attitude, word, and deed.

If we only live outwardly before men, we are hypocrites. It's very easy to fake it in front of others, but we cannot fake out God, who examines our hearts (1 Thess. 2:4-5). Jesus said that all sin

begins in the heart (Mark 7:21-23), and so we need to get in the habit of judging it at that level before it goes any farther. If we do not develop this habit, we are deceiving ourselves if we think that we are walking with God. It is especially important to avoid rationalizing and excusing our sin by blaming others. Having a blameless conscience before God means that I quickly confess and turn away from any sin that His Word or His Spirit convicts me of, no matter what others may have done to me.

- (3) We need to ask forgiveness of those we have sinned against and take steps to avoid future offenses.

There should not be anyone who could say to us, "You sinned against me and have never made it right." We don't need to go to another person if our sin against them was only in our mind. We should repent of that sin before God, but if the other person is not aware of it, we don't need to ask his or her forgiveness. But if we know that we sinned against the person directly or behind his back (through gossip or slander), we need to ask forgiveness and seek to avoid repeating the same sin again.

Bill Gothard has some helpful teaching on this subject. He emphasizes the importance of using correct wording so as to reflect full repentance and sincere humility. It is best to call or to go directly to the person, rather than to write a letter. Do not say, "If I was wrong, please forgive me." As Bill points out, this is like saying, "If my personality (for which I'm not responsible) has offended you, there must be something wrong with your ability to get along with others. But I'll be big-hearted about this and assume that maybe it's my fault (which I'm not fully convinced it is) and ask you to forgive me—if you still think I'm wrong, that is" ("Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts Manual," Clear Conscience, p. 28).

Rather, you should say, "God has convicted me of how wrong I've been in ____ (basic offense). I've called to ask, 'Will you forgive me?'" (*ibid.*, p. 29).

- (4) The motivation for a life of integrity is the reality of eternity and the coming judgment.

Paul states that his practice of seeking to maintain a blameless conscience before God and men stems from the certainty of the resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked (24:15-16). If

there is no God, no resurrection, and no future judgment, then you are a fool to live as a Christian. Those aren't my words; those are Paul's words (1 Cor. 15:19). If there is no eternity, then live for all the immediate pleasure that you can get, because you will die soon (1 Cor. 15:32). But if God lives and if He is going to raise every person to stand before Him in judgment, then everyone should repent of his sins, trust in Christ as Savior, and live all of life with a blameless conscience before God and before men. If you cannot go from here today with such a clear conscience, your greatest and most urgent need is to get right with God!

Conclusion

As we'll see next week, Felix was a sad case, and here he waffles. He knows that Paul is innocent and should be released. But he also knows that the Jews won't be happy if he lets Paul go. He can't afford any more unrest among his constituents. So he does what many politicians do: He punts! He postpones the case with the excuse that he will decide it after he hears the testimony of Lysias, the commander. This gets the Jews off his back and out of town. He salves his guilty conscience by giving orders that Paul's custody should be fairly comfortable and free.

This shows us that we have no guarantee that everything will go well with us when we walk uprightly before God. Joseph acted with godly integrity when he resisted the seductive moves of Potiphar's wife, and it landed him in prison for several years. But the Lord was with him there, and it's better to have the Lord with you in prison than to have sinful pleasure without the Lord. It's better to be in custody with a clear conscience, as Paul was, than to have power and money, but be alienated from God, as Felix was.

So devote yourself to living with integrity by speaking the truth in every situation; by living in line with God's Word; and, by keeping a blameless conscience before God and men. However difficult your circumstances here, you will sleep well, knowing that you will dwell in heaven with God throughout eternity.

Discussion Questions

1. Since many of God's servants are slandered, how can we avoid being taken in by slanderous accusations?
2. Does speaking the truth require that we divulge all that we know about a situation? How can we speak truth and yet keep appropriate confidences?
3. Why is the phrase, "Let your conscience be your guide" only partially true?
4. Living with a clear conscience before God and men is the mark of every true Christian. Agree/disagree? Why?

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