INTEGRITY UNDER FIRE

1 Timothy 6:13-16

By

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A recent *Newsweek* (May 19, 1994) opened with an article recounting President Clinton’s legendary ability to lead people “to believe that he agrees with them entirely ... without ever quite committing himself to their position ... a gift” they noted, “given only to the best politicians.”

During the Gulf War several years ago, a man wrote to his Senator, urging him to support the ejection of Iraq from Kuwait. He received a letter agreeing with him, stating the Senator’s strong support for President Bush’s response to the crisis. But he also received a second letter, sent by mistake, thanking him for opposing the war, pointing out that the Senator himself had voted against the war resolution! The Senator must have taken lessons from the politician who was asked where he stood on an issue. He replied, “Some of my friends are for it; some of my friends are against it. And I’m for my friends!” Someone has observed that politicians and crabs are creatures who move in such a way that it is impossible to tell whether they are coming or going!

Integrity, the character quality of being above reproach, true to your word, and not compromising your principles even when you’re under fire, seems to be in scarce commodity among politicians and, sadly, even among many Christians and Christian leaders. But Christians should be people marked by integrity, especially when we’re under fire. If we waffle when the pressure is on, it hurts our witness and people shrug off the great message we stand for.

That’s especially true of Christian leaders. If we fudge on integrity, the enemy uses it to dilute the power of the gospel we proclaim. As with banking or the stock market, integrity is the name of the game when it comes to ministry and the preaching of the Word. For the sake of Christ who gave His life for His church, we who preach the Word must strive to be men of integrity. But that puts pastors in a bind, because like most people, pastors like people...
and want to be liked. But preaching uncompromising truth and preaching against sin is not always popular. You learn early in ministry that you can’t please everyone. So you’re tempted to play the politician, to try to make everyone think that you agree with them.

Timothy was feeling the pressure to compromise. Timid and peace-loving by nature, he had to stand strongly against the false teachers in Ephesus. It would have been easy to water down essential truth in the name of peace and unity. So after exhorting him to fight the good fight of the faith and reminding him of the good confession he had made at his baptism, Paul (in 6:13-16) gives a solemn charge to Timothy to maintain his integrity in his ministry above all else, even if it means persecution or death. He states the aim: to maintain his integrity under fire; and he gives three great facts which, if Timothy will stay aware of, will motivate him to such integrity: God’s presence; Christ’s coming; and, God’s sovereign supremacy.

To maintain integrity under fire, live with an awareness of God’s presence, Christ’s coming, and God’s sovereign supremacy.

1. The aim desired: Integrity under fire.

“I charge you ... keep the commandment without stain or reproach.” The question is, what does Paul mean by “the commandment”? In light of the context and the thrust of the whole book, the best view is that Paul means that Timothy maintain his personal integrity and that he discharge his ministry above reproach (so Calvin, Matthew Henry; see 4:16, “pay close attention to yourself and your teaching”; 6:20, “guard what has been entrusted to you”). He is charging Timothy before God that he live in such a manner that neither his personal life nor his ministry would bring any blot on the name of Christ.

Such integrity rests on a foundation beneath the surface, where no one but you and God can see. That foundation is laid a brick at a time, as you live each day with your thoughts and private deeds laid bare before the God who sees all (Heb. 4:13). Do you spend time each day alone with God, opening your heart to Him, allowing His Word to search the thoughts and intents of your heart (Heb. 4:12)? Do you judge sinful thoughts, confessing them to
God and forsaking them as you seek, rather, to set your mind on
the things above?

Men, you can be sitting in church and glance at an attractive
woman and allow your mind to be filled with lust. Or you can be
out of town, where no one knows you, and be tempted to indulge
the flesh through pornography. No one sees your heart, except you
and God. Integrity is built on judging and forsaking such thoughts
and deeds. Women, you can sit in church with a smile on your face,
yet be filled with jealousy and bitterness toward another woman
who gossiped about you. Whatever the secret sin, you’re building a
life of integrity if you remember that God knows your heart, and
you live in obedience to Him even though no other human being is
watching.

Some years ago *Psychology Today* (10/83) reported the results of
a poll of more than 650 readers. The question posed was, “If you
could secretly push a button and thereby eliminate any person with
no repercussions to yourself, would you press that button?” Sixty
percent said yes—69 percent of the men, 56 percent of the women.
One man posed an intriguing question: “If such a device were in-
vented, would anyone live to tell about it?”

Jesus said that murder begins in the heart where anger, bitter-
ness, and hatred go unjudged (Matt. 5:21-22; Mark 7:21-23). So
that’s where a life of integrity must be built a brick at a time. Such
integrity is built in secret, but it manifests itself under fire. The
pressure brings out what has been built in. Paul gives Timothy
three things that he must keep before him that will motivate him to
build such integrity into his life:

2. **The awareness demanded: God’s presence, Christ’s coming, and God’s sovereign supremacy.**

   A. The awareness of God’s presence will motivate us to a
      life of integrity.

   “I charge you in the presence of God ... and of Christ Jesus”
   (6:13). The close association of God and Christ Jesus, plus the
   assumed omnipresence of Christ, point to Jesus’ deity. Paul reminds
   Timothy that both God the Father and Christ are listening in and
   watching as he gives this charge to Timothy. Keeping in mind the
fact that God and Christ are always with us will motivate us to live each moment to please Him, whether or not anyone else is there.

Note how Paul describes both God and Christ here. God “gives life to all things.” Christ Jesus “testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate.” Why does he use these descriptions in this context? Because Timothy was under fire in his ministry! Paul wanted him to remember that the God in whose presence he lived and served is both the giver and sustainer of life itself. If evil men threatened to kill Timothy, God could either preserve him from death or give him courage to be a faithful witness unto death, even as Christ faithfully bore witness to Pilate, rather than seeking to save His life by softening His witness. Though the cross is foolishness to many, Timothy should remember Christ who bore witness even through the cross, and not shrink from preaching God’s foolishness through which He is pleased to give eternal life to all who believe.

I read about a pastor in India who felt God’s call to go to the second most sacred site for a Hindu pilgrimage and plant a church there. His wife chose to go with him, taking along their children, even though the last missionary who tried to live there had been murdered and his head placed in the temple. They went and lived in poverty, in filthy conditions, with no human means of support.

In the fifteen years he has been there, this man of God has been beaten many times, he has been threatened with being skinned and thrown into the sea, his oldest son has been beaten and threatened with crucifixion for preaching, and the schools he has built for pastors have been burned to the ground, and he has built them again. But he perseveres, willing to lay down his life for Christ, because he trusts in the God who gives life to all and he knows that Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate is with him.

Most of us know nothing of such hardship. I sure don’t! I hear a lot of American pastors talk about the stress of ministry, and I don’t deny that there are pressures. On a few occasions I’ve had some angry people calling for my resignation. I’ve joked to Marla, “At least so far no one is after my life; they’re just after my job!” But whatever pressures you or I face to compromise our testimony to God’s saving grace in Christ, we can stand firm if we remember
the presence of God, who gives life to all, and Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate.

B. The awareness of Christ’s coming will motivate us to a life of integrity.

Paul goes on to urge Timothy to “keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which He will reveal in His own time” (literal translation). Although Christ is always present spiritually, He is not present visibly until that glorious moment when He will come again and take us to be with Him.

Jesus told the eleven, as they were anxious about His impending departure, not to be troubled, but to trust in God and in Him, because He was going to prepare a place for them. Then He promised, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:3). Jesus’ second coming is as sure as His word! Unless He was a liar or imposter, we can count on His promise and know that one day soon He will appear and that we who have believed in Him will be caught up “in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:17).

Any delay in Christ’s coming is certainly not due to God’s inability, as Paul’s final crescendo of praise makes clear! Rather, it is due to God’s sovereign timing—He will bring it about “in His own time.” As Jesus told the disciples just prior to His ascension when they inquired about His second coming, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses …” (Acts 1:7, 8). In other words, we are to get on with His work, aware that He is coming, but not sure exactly when.

The 20th Century Fox company once 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.” (In “Bits & Pieces,”
3/85.)

I don’t know if he got the job, but his attitude was what ours
should be as we conduct ourselves in this world. We don’t know
when our Lord will return; we just know He’s coming. So we ought
always to live without stain or reproach, ready to meet Him.

Thus Paul is saying that to maintain integrity, especially under
fire, we must live with the awareness of God’s presence and of
Christ’s soon coming.

C. The awareness of God’s sovereign supremacy will moti-
vate us to a life of integrity.

Paul’s mention of God’s sovereignly fixing the time of Christ’s
return leads him to an outburst of praise as he thinks on who God
is. Verses like this overwhelm me as I think about preaching on
them, because I can scarcely grasp them myself, let alone say any-
thing to make them more meaningful to you. “Who is adequate for
these things?” (2 Cor. 2:16)!

(1) God is blessed. This means that He is perfect and suffi-
cient in and of Himself, that all satisfaction and joy are inherent in
God’s very nature. He did not create the universe or the human
race to fulfill some lack in Himself. God wasn’t lonely or needing
fellowship before He created man. Nor is God frustrated or un-
happy with the way history is going, as if it were out of His control.
Although Scripture pictures God as displeased with our disobedi-
ence and rebellion, nothing we do can disturb the deep, abiding,
settled blessedness of God.

The blessed God is the only source of true blessing and joy
for His creatures. As Jesus taught in the Beatitudes, we can only
know true happiness when we are rightly related to God who pos-
sesses such blessedness infinitely in Himself. We may find fleeting
happiness in relationships or things. We may find passing pleasure
in art, beauty, nature, or sex. But true and lasting satisfaction can
only be found in God Himself who is blessed.

(2) God is the only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of
lords. The Greek word, dynastes, refers to the inherent capacity of
someone to carry something out. God delegates authority to earthly
kings as He wishes, but they are nothing in His sight, and He can dispose of the mightiest earthly ruler as a man flicks an ant off his arm. The proud Nebuchadnezzar ruled over the greatest kingdom on earth, but God humbled him like a beast of the field so that he might learn that “the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes” (Dan. 4:17, 25, 32). God is the only Sovereign!

When God graciously restored Nebuchadnezzar to his throne, he tells us, “I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’” (Dan. 4:34-35). We as creatures can only know true blessing when we humble ourselves under the sovereign hand of the Almighty God!

The title, “King of kings and Lord of lords” that here is ascribed to God the Father is also given to the Lord Jesus Christ in His second coming, which proves His deity (Rev. 17:14; 19:16). It would be blasphemy for a mere creature to share this exalted title with the only Sovereign of the universe. Any teaching that diminishes the supreme sovereignty of the Lord Jesus Christ is from the devil, whose one goal has been to overthrow the sovereignty of the Triune God.

(3) God alone is immortal (lit., “free from death”). He is the only uncreated, self-existent being who is not subject to death. The Father has life in Himself and gives it to whomever He wishes, and Jesus claimed the same divine attribute for Himself (John 5:26, 21). Proud men exalt themselves as if they will live forever. God sends an invisible virus or microbe and lays the strongest of men in the dust. The mighty Alexander the Great conquered the world but died in his early thirties in a drunken stupor with a raging fever. Only God is immortal!

(4) God dwells in unapproachable light. This refers to the splendor of God’s inherent glory, and especially to His unapproachable holiness. No sinful human being could even dare to draw near to God apart from His grace in Christ any more than we
would dare to put a man on the sun. He would be instantly con-
sumed. We can’t even look at the sun for more than a split second
without being blinded. Even so much brighter is God in His splen-
dor!

(5) God is invisible. “Whom no man has seen or can see.” God
is spirit and cannot be apprehended by our finite human
senses. We could never come to know such a great and mighty
Being through our own reason or will power or human ability. But
God condescended to reveal Himself to us in Jesus, who is the
visible manifestation of the invisible God. Jesus said, “Not that any
man has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has
seen the Father” (John 6:46). He further claimed that no one
knows “who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the
Son wills to reveal Him” (Luke 10:22). We can’t even come to
know this sovereign, immortal, unapproachably holy, invisible God
unless the Lord Jesus chooses to reveal Him to us!

So with Paul, we can only be overwhelmed with worship as
we proclaim, “To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.” If
we maintain an awareness of the sovereign supremacy of our God,
we can also maintain our integrity as men and women of God,
even when we’re under fire.

Conclusion

John Piper, a pastor in Minneapolis, writes about a Sunday
when he decided to preach on the greatness of God in His holiness
and majesty as revealed in Isaiah’s vision (Isa. 6). Normally, of
course, Piper would have worked on applying such truth to his
flock. But on that day he felt led to make a test of whether the
portrayal of the greatness of God in and of itself would meet the
needs of people.

What he didn’t realize was that not long before that Sunday
one of the young families in his church had discovered that their
child was being sexually abused by a close relative. This family was
there that Sunday and sat under his message. Piper reflects, “I
wonder how many advisers to us pastors today would have said:
‘Pastor Piper, can’t you see your people are hurting? Can’t you
come down out of the heavens and get practical? Don’t you realize
what kind of people sit in front of you on Sunday?’
Some weeks later he learned the story. The husband took him aside after a Sunday service and said, “John, these have been the hardest months of our lives. Do you know what has gotten me through? The vision of the greatness of God’s holiness that you gave me the first week of January. It has been the rock we could stand on” (in The Supremacy of God in Preaching [Baker], p. 10).

Is proper theology and sound doctrine practical or impractical? What need do you have, what problem do you face, that cannot be met by getting a bigger vision of the Almighty God? Is your aim to keep God’s commandment without stain or reproach, but you’re feeling pressure to compromise your testimony? Then get a bigger awareness of God: of His presence which is always with you; of the soon appearing of the already-present Lord Jesus Christ; and of God’s sovereign supremacy. By His grace you will join Timothy and many other saints who have glorified God by testifying the good confession. You will live with integrity, even under fire.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is integrity so rare, seemingly even among Christian leaders?

2. The trend today is for Christian leaders to be “vulnerable,” sharing their faults. But Timothy was to live “without stain or reproach.” Where’s the balance?

3. One popular pastor and author says we need to be more “man-centered” in our theology. Why is this fundamentally flawed?

4. How (practically) can we gain a bigger view of God’s sovereign supremacy?

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