

October 8, 1994  
FCF Men's Retreat

Becoming Men of Integrity  
1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

In preparing for this message on the subject of integrity, I came across this quote from a 1980 *Sports Illustrated*: "Fame is a vapor, popularity is an accident and money takes wings. The only thing that endures is character." Great quote! The speaker? O. J. Simpson! Apart from his innocence or guilt in his current trial for murdering his wife, the events surrounding that trial have revealed that in his private life, O. J. abused his wife verbally and physically and chased other women--hardly a man of character! I'm not sharing the quote to run down O. J., but rather to show that there is a big difference between talking about integrity and living it. All of us would say we want to be men of character or integrity. But how do we live it?

First, what is it? The word in English has the idea of being trustworthy or incorruptible; of keeping your word; of being true to commitments; of firm adherence to a moral code. In the New Testament, there are several words that express the concept, but the main idea is being above reproach (1 Tim. 3:10 [deacons]; Titus 1:6 [elders]) or blameless (1 Thess. 2:10). This doesn't mean perfection, which no one attains in this life. It does mean a life that is not hypocritical. A man of integrity doesn't use abusive speech with his family or sneak into porno shops when he is alone in a strange town, and then put on his Christian face at church. I just read in the current *Leadership* (Summer, 1994, pp. 96 ff.) about a pastor who has been secretly enslaved to pornography for years. In my opinion, he ought not to be in the ministry, because he is not a man of integrity. At any point you touch a man of integrity, his life rings true for God.

The apostle Paul was such a man. He emphasizes his own integrity in our text (see also, 1:5). It may surprise you that he would defend himself, since the popular wisdom of our day is that if you're right, you don't have to defend yourself. But Satan desperately wants to discredit God's Word, and one frequent method he uses is to discredit the messenger. Sometimes the attacks come

from those within the Christian camp; at other times from those without. But Paul did not hesitate to affirm his own integrity for the sake of the gospel.

In Thessalonica, the attacks were probably coming mostly from without. The Jews, who were jealous of his success and opposed to his message, stirred up a bunch of rabble rousers and the city authorities against Paul, so that he had to leave town. They even followed him to Berea, 50 miles away, to stir up opposition there. Acts 17:4 reports that a number of leading women in the city had believed after hearing Paul preach. Perhaps the husbands of these women were saying, "Paul is just another religious huckster like we see come through here all the time. How could you be so dumb as to fall for what he said? He's just out to make a buck or to con women into sleeping with him. Don't be so gullible!" To answer these charges, Paul asserts and defends his own integrity with the aim of defending the gospel and of urging the new Christians to walk worthy of God.

The main message, when it comes to integrity, is:

To be men of integrity, we need to live  
all of life to please God.

We see here the starting place for integrity; the focus for developing integrity; and, the result of integrity.

1. The starting place for integrity is believing the gospel of God.

Paul here refers to the gospel four times (2:2, 4, 8, 9; see also 1:5), and three of those times he refers to it as "the gospel of God." The phrase underscores the fact that the gospel originates with God; Paul didn't think it up himself. The gospel isn't the best thinking of the religious minds of the day. It comes from God who revealed it to us by sending His Son as the sacrifice for our sins. If God had not revealed it, we would not have it.

This means that God, not man, takes the initiative in the gospel. Put another way, salvation is an act of God, not of men. Men cannot, do not, and will not choose God of their own free will, because their will is not free. The human will is hopelessly fallen in sin, enslaved to sin, hostile toward God, and not inclined in any way to choose God unless God, in His mercy, first moves in the

sinner's heart (Rom. 3:10-18; 8:7-8; Eph. 2:1-3). So accepting the gospel of God does not require just a human choice to believe in Christ, but rather it demands a supernatural working of God's Spirit in imparting spiritual life to those who are spiritually dead. When the Holy Spirit moves in the hearts of sinners to impart new life, along with repentance and faith, there is powerful transformation of life (1 Thess. 1:4-10).

Of course, Paul had seen God work in this powerful way in his own life many years before. The point I'm making is, since integrity involves living with a God-ward focus, to please God in all we think, say, and do, we can't begin to be men of integrity in the primary sense until we have been converted through faith in Christ's atoning work on our behalf. And, we can't help others to become men of integrity until they have heard and responded to the gospel of God. Pasting moral behavior on a corrupt heart is like putting a tuxedo on a pig. It may look nice for a short while, but the pig's nature is going to come out and ruin the tuxedo. It is only the power of God through the gospel that can transform the heart, and integrity is a matter of the heart.

If any of you men have never experienced the life-transforming power of God through faith in the gospel, you must start there. Nothing else I say pertains to you if you have not personally known the power of the gospel to convert your soul.

2. The focus for developing integrity is to please God in every way.

Paul draws a marked contrast between pleasing men and pleasing God, who examines (approves by testing) the heart (2:4). In making this claim, Paul is not saying that he did not care how he lived in front of people or what they thought about his way of life, that he just answered to God. Sometimes you hear men say, "I don't have to answer to people; I just answer to God" as an excuse for not being accountable. That's not what Paul meant. In fact, he repeatedly appeals to their knowledge of his blameless life (note, "you know," "knowing," you recall," "you are witnesses," 1:5; 2:1, 2, 5, 9, 10, 11).

What he is saying is, his focus was on pleasing God who sees every thought, motive, and attitude we ever have. If a man's focus

is on pleasing men, he will lack integrity because he will act one way around one person (to make a good impression) and another way around another person, and yet another way when he thinks no one he knows is looking. But if your focus is on pleasing the all-knowing, all-seeing, all-present God, then you'll become a man of integrity.

Paul mentions three areas where we need to focus on pleasing God: Pure doctrine; pure living; and, pure motives.

A. We please God through pure doctrine.

"Our exhortation does not come from error" (2:3). God's Word is the only standard for absolute truth (John 17:17). Paul's challenge to Timothy applies not only to those of us who preach and teach God's Word publicly, but to every Christian man: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). There have always been those who have twisted the truth, but the end times especially will be marked by widespread apostasy (2 Thess. 2:3; Mark 13:21-22). We need to be men of truth.

As I've mentioned before, David Wells in his book, *No Place for Truth* [Eerdmans], and its sequel, *God in the Wasteland* [Eerdmans], shows how the American church has on a wide scale abandoned biblical truth and embraced whatever works and whatever makes us feel good. We're being encouraged to magnify "love" and de-emphasize doctrine because it only divides. So when popular Christian authors come out with stuff that is heretical and anyone dares to challenge them on it, the critic is called unloving. The false teacher is a poor, misunderstood victim of heresy hunting.

If we're men-pleasers, we'll be tempted to bend the truth to please people. Frankly, there are some hard teachings in God's Word, and it's always tempting to water them down so as not to offend anyone. That's even true in presenting the gospel. The doctrine of eternal punishment in hell isn't exactly popular or heart-warming (no pun intended!). But it's God's truth and we can't waffle on truth and be men of integrity. We please God through pure doctrine.

B. We please God through pure living.

“Our exhortation does not come from ... impurity” (2:3). Nor did Paul use the gospel as “a pretext for greed” (2:5). In Paul’s day, as in ours, there were men who used religion as a cloak for seducing emotionally needy women (2 Tim. 3:6) and/or for making an easy buck and living in luxury. Paul was especially careful not to fall into either sin. He was morally pure; he was on guard against greed; and he worked hard to provide for his needs (2:9).

In seminary, Dr. Walvoord preached a chapel message just before graduation warning us about the dangers of sex, silver, and sloth in the ministry. He was certainly on target, since those three sins have brought down many men. About 31% of men in our culture watch at least one X-rated video or movie per year (*Leadership* [Fall, 1992], p. 133). Shockingly, 20% of pastors admit to viewing pornography in some form at least once a month (*Leadership* [Winter, 1988], p. 24)! Only 64% of evangelical seminary students think that watching pornographic movies is morally wrong (*Christianity Today* [1/15/88], p. 25)! If a man doesn’t think it is displeasing to God, then there’s not much of a reason to root it out of his life!

Sexual purity begins in the mind, as Jesus taught (Matt. 5:27-29; Mark 7:21-23). If you judge lustful thoughts, it won’t go any further. If you yield there, you’ll be susceptible to the temptation of pornography. If you yield there, it’s a short step to outward sexual sin. To please God, we’ve got to get radical against sexually impure thoughts.

There’s often a link in Scripture between sexual immorality and greed (Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5). A district in the Assemblies of God denomination did a study of their ministers who had been disciplined for sexual impurity and discovered that every one had failed earlier in financial dealings--living a lie about tithing, or not paying bills (*Leadership* [Spring, 1988], p. 15). Whether the common factor is a lack of self-discipline or a living for selfish gain, we all face the temptation to exploit God’s truth to take advantage of others, either through improper sexual relationships or through bad business practices.

I’ve known men who use the church for making business contacts. A man in my church in California who was in a business where you’re supposed to recruit people to sell under you told me

that he had a goal of meeting at least five new people at church each week. I told him that would be a great goal if his motive were to meet these people so he could minister to them. But his goal was to meet them so he could get them signed up to sell soap! But, he assured me, this was ministering to them, since it helped them become successful people! To be men of integrity, we must commit ourselves to pleasing God through pure living, being free from impurity and greed.

C. We please God through pure motives and goals.

“For our exhortation does not come ... by way of deceit” (2:3). The word “deceit” should be familiar to every fisherman. It means “bait.” A fisherman is practicing deceit on those poor fish, because he holds out in front of them what looks like a tasty meal, but there’s a hook in it. The fish bites and instead of getting a meal, it becomes one.

Paul wasn’t using the gospel to try to trick people so that he could use them for his own advantage or to build a name for himself as a successful preacher. He wasn’t after glory from men, nor did he use his title as “apostle” for his own advantage (2:6). Nor did he use trickery or slick salesmanship to sell the gospel, promising people things that the gospel never promises. Sometimes, in an effort to get people to receive Christ, we tell them how Christ will solve all their problems, but we don’t tell them the hardships and cost of following Christ. So they come to Christ under false pretenses. When their problems don’t go away, or grow even worse, they grow bitter and fall away.

Paul’s motives were to please God who had graciously entrusted him with the gospel (2:4). He lived consciously before God’s sight (2:5, 10). His aim was to preach and live in such a way that others would come to know God and learn to walk in a manner worthy of God (2:12). When you live as Paul did, you realize that God knows every corrupt thought you have, and so you instantly judge such thoughts and take them captive to Christ (2 Cor. 10:4). God is witness to every conversation you have, and so you don’t allow any rotten words to come out of your mouth, but only words that build up others (Eph. 4:29). God sees all your deeds, and so even when you’re out of public view, you seek to please Him with good deeds (Matt. 6:3-4).

The starting place for integrity is genuinely believing the gospel of God; the focus for developing integrity is to please God in every way, through pure doctrine, pure living, and pure motives. Finally,

3. The result of integrity is impact for God.

Paul's coming to the Thessalonians "was not in vain" (2:1; see also 1:5; 2:13). When a man lives transparently before God, he can speak confidently to others because he has known God's transforming power in a personal way. When Paul first walked into Thessalonica, his back was probably still scabbed over from the deep wounds of his unjust beating in Philippi (2:2). It was in the Philippian jail that Paul and Silas, in too much pain and discomfort to sleep, their backs oozing blood and their feet in the stocks, sang hymns of praise to God at midnight (Acts 16:25). That's reality with God!

Frankly, after that experience, I would probably have said, "It's time for a break!" But not Paul! He moves on to Thessalonica and encounters still more opposition. But, because he wasn't living for the approval of men, but of God, he imparted to these people not only the gospel, but also his own life, because they had become very dear to him (2:8). With the tenderness of a nursing mother (2:7) and the gentle exhortations of a caring father (2:11), Paul's integrity impacted these people for God. They could never be the same.

If you lack integrity, you'll lack boldness in witness and in teaching God's Word, because you'll be afraid you'll be found out. Hypocrites don't teach with authority (Matt. 7:29). But when you've got integrity, your life backs your word, and so even if people strongly oppose you, you can speak with confidence because you're sure of God's working in you. The result is that people will accept your message, not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God which will powerfully perform its work in all who believe (2:13).

### Conclusion

A few years ago, a man in Long Beach, California, went into a fried chicken place to get some chicken for himself and the young lady he was with. She waited in the car while he went in to get their

order. Inadvertently, the store manager handed him a chicken box filled with the cash proceeds of the day instead of a box of chicken. He was going to make a deposit so he had camouflaged the money by putting it in a regular chicken box.

The guy took his box and drove away with his girl friend. When they got to the park and opened their lunch, they discovered a box of money. That was a test for integrity! The man realized the mistake, so he drove back to the restaurant and gave the money back to the manager, who was elated. In fact, he told the young man to stick around, because he wanted to call the newspaper and have them put his picture in it. He said, "You're the most honest guy in town!"

But the man replied in horror, "Oh, no, don't do that!" "Why not?" asked the manager. "Well," he said, "you see, I'm married, and the woman I'm with is not my wife!"

It's possible to be a good man in the eyes of everyone, even in the church, and yet to be harboring secret sin in your life. If you're doing that, you lack integrity. It's possible that you've never experienced God's transforming power through the gospel. Or, perhaps, you're not living daily with your life exposed to God, seeking to please Him with every thought, word, and deed. You're probably not allowing the truth of His Word to confront your sin, to teach you, reprove you, correct you, and train you in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16).

A number of years ago an agnostic who was contemplating suicide decided that if he could find a minister who lived his faith he would listen to him. So he hired a private detective to watch Will Houghton, a preacher who was president of Moody Bible Institute in the 1940's. The investigator followed Houghton for many days without his knowing it. His report revealed that the man was for real. He lived his faith. The agnostic went to Houghton's church, was converted, and later sent his daughter to Moody Bible Institute.

Integrity before God results in impact for God--in our families, in the church, and in the world. To be men of integrity, we must live all of life to please Him. Then we'll have the joy of seeing our lives count for all eternity!