

# Integrity – The Key to Character and the Cure for Inconsistency

by Dr. Steven C. Riser

Why does it seem that the collective fabric of our society is becoming unraveled amid the revelations of lust, greed and immorality in high and low places? What is happening and where are we headed? Has there ever been a more critical time in history when we needed people of integrity?

The need for integrity today is perhaps as great as it has ever been. Integrity is essential if we are going to become people who positively and powerfully impact others.

Many people today view integrity as an out-dated idea that is either expendable or no longer applicable in an age of moral relativism. Just as honesty is essential for trust and trust is essential for any healthy relationship and for the ability to lead, so integrity is essential to becoming trustworthy. It has been said that if you can't trust someone in all areas, you can't trust them in any. We compromise our integrity whenever we betray a trust. Integrity is a prerequisite to credibility. It involves an inner sense of wholeness which results from being consistently honest and morally upright. Integrity is crucial in all aspects of life: professional, personal, social and spiritual.

## What is integrity?

Among other definitions, Webster describes integrity as “*soundness of moral character.*” Integrity from a biblical viewpoint has to do with *being morally sound*. What does it mean to be morally sound? A person with integrity knows what is important to God and consistently lives in light of what is important to Him. It involves more than living our values; it involves subscribing to God's values and with His help learning to conform our conduct to those values. Integrity is like the foundation of a house, if it is unstable, the entire house may come apart when it comes under pressure.

Integrity is the basic element of Christian character. It is the first characteristic of those welcomed into God's presence (Psa.15:2). It is the first characteristic that distinguishes godly leadership: “*So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart, and guided them with his skillful hands*” (Psa. 78:72) Integrity is not determined by circumstances, based on credentials and is not to be confused with

reputation. A person with the integrity of heart is a morally and spiritually healthy individual.

A person's reputation is only the shadow of his character – in some cases the shadow (reputation) may appear larger or smaller than the actual height (character) of the person. A good reputation may or may not be an accurate reflection of a person's character. A good reputation is as good as gold but a person with integrity owns the gold mine. If you take care of your character and become a person of integrity, your reputation will take care of itself.

Integrity has to do with a sense of consistency between a person's inner values and attitudes and his outward words and actions. The more consistent we are, the higher the degree of integrity we possess. A good biblical example of integrity is Daniel (5:13-17). Daniel's values, words and actions were thoroughly consistent. You can't put a price tag on integrity because genuine integrity is not for sale.

Integrity helps us know what to expect from others. The more consistent a person is, the more confidence we have in how they will act in the future. An unpredictable leader suggests that they are not making decisions on the basis of deeply held biblical values but on how they may feel at the moment. It is hard, if not impossible, to trust such people. People will trust those who have proved themselves to be trustworthy.

### **A lack of integrity may take one of four different forms**

1. Inconsistency between a person's words and actions (saying one thing and doing another). Verbal inconsistency expresses itself as a lack of honesty (Acts 5:1-10). *Honesty is without question an absolutely essential quality of leadership.*
2. Inconsistency between one's actions on one side and against one's words and values on the other. This inconsistency comes across as a lack of courage to act according to his values (Mk. 14:29-32, 66-72).
3. Inconsistency between one's values on one side and one's words/actions on the other. This political syndrome results from saying/doing what we think others want to hear in order to please them.
4. Inconsistency in every area – no consistency/integrity among a person's values, words and actions. Such a person is out of touch with himself and reality; he is not functioning in the real world.

The common denominator in all these different forms of a lack of integrity is simply: inconsistency. We all have values we live by whether we are conscious of them or not. Our values energize our motives that drive our actions. The important thing is that we consciously choose to live by God's values in Scripture. People with high integrity have high values and live by them.

All godly leaders have a clear sense of biblical values that gives guidance regarding how to relate to God, ourselves and others. We must seek to relate to each other in humility and love. We need to learn to listen, speak the truth in love, persuade, build consensus, handle disagreement, forgive, receive correction, confess sin, appreciate the concept of collective wisdom and understand the point of view –

even with people with whom we disagree. Proverbs 10:9 says, “*He who walks in integrity walks securely, but he who perverts his ways will be found out.*”

### **How can we develop and maintain integrity?**

Integrity is developed as we learn and practice certain skills:

1) The first skill is learning to develop a deep personal honesty through radical self-confrontation. A person of integrity does not make excuses or blame others for his short-comings.

2) If we would become persons of integrity we must first develop the proper moral stands. Since God is the source of morality, the proper moral standards are based on His character as revealed in His Word and reinforced in our consciences by the Holy Spirit.

3) If we would become persons of integrity, God’s standards must become our standards; His values must become our values; we must learn to love what He loves and hate what He hates.

4) In order to do this we must learn “*the fear of the Lord*” – we must develop a healthy respect for God. “*The fear of the Lord*” teaches us to love what is good and hate what is evil (Rom. 12:13). God’s Word must be effectively assimilated in our heart, mind and conscience so that it will influence our thoughts, words, actions and attitudes.

5) Next, to become persons of integrity we need to realize that we can’t live the Christian life in our own strength. We need God’s enablement; therefore must learn how to be controlled by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18). In order to be controlled by God’s Spirit we must submit ourselves to God. We need to allow God to make the final decision for us based on His wise and loving Word.

6) If we wish to be persons of integrity we must develop genuine humility. What you see is what you get. We are not pretending to be some one we are not. A humble person is a realistic, teachable person.

7) Finally, if we would become persons of integrity, we must learn the wisdom of being personally accountable to others for our moral and spiritual development. It takes others to bring out the best in us and we all need accountability partners that serve as an encouragement and a reality check.

### **Can we measure our integrity? If so, how?**

Consider the following ten questions:

1. What are you like when no one else is around?
2. How do you treat others who can’t benefit you?
3. How sincere, humble and transparent are you?
4. Are you the same person when you are with different people?
5. Are you the same person in public as in private?
6. Do you quickly admit to yourself and others when you’re wrong?

7. Do you subscribe to God's absolute moral standards in His Word?
8. Do you talk to people or about them behind their backs?
9. Are you accountable to at least one person for what you think, say and do?
10. Do you submit to God's Spirit and seek to please Him in all you do?

**What are some practical ways we can develop integrity in our every day lives?**

1. Seek out godly mentors who can model consistent character.
2. Employ clear, direct, encouraging and edifying communication.
3. Place a high value on humility, sincerity and transparency.
4. Engage in regular and radical self-confrontation (Psa. 139:23-24).
5. Esteem others better than yourself and be willing to sacrifice for others.
6. Always fulfill promises; don't make promises you can't keep.
7. Develop a servant spirit as a significant part of who you are in Christ.
8. Commit yourself to adding value to others and helping them succeed.
9. Encourage those whom you serve to add value to others.
10. Regularly assimilate God's Word and continuously submit to His Spirit.

**If we want to become persons of integrity what else do we have to do?**

1. Commit yourself to cultivate honesty, reliability and confidentiality.
2. Decide ahead of time that you will do the right thing no matter what.
3. Prioritize any activity where your credibility is at stake.
4. Write out and review all your commitments regularly.
5. Do what you should do before you do what you want to do.

**What are the negative alternatives to becoming a person of integrity?**

- A person who has no integrity is a slave to impulses, circumstances and/or others.
- The alternative is to become a morally and spiritually unhealthy individual and to experience the corresponding distrust and disapproval of others.
- We will not enjoy happy, harmonious or healthy relationship with others.
- If you don't earn people's trust, you won't enjoy the confidence of others.
- We will not have credibility or enjoy the esteem and respect of others.
- We will lose valuable opportunities to positively impact the lives of others.
- We will not be able to lead effectively without providing a godly example.
- A person with a lack of integrity will not "feel good" about himself.
- Such people lack meaning and fulfillment for failing to pursue God's purposes.

## **What are the positive consequences of being a person in integrity?**

- It is almost impossible to over exaggerate the positive impact of integrity.
- Two of the most important consequences are: enjoying the trust and respect of others.
- We know we have been a success when those who know us best respect us the most.
- When we respect someone as a person, we admire them.
- When we respect someone as a friend, we love them.
- When we respect someone as a leader, we follow them.
- When we honor God as God, we trust, love, obey and worship Him.

If we are persons of character and integrity, we have the opportunity to add value to the lives of others first and foremost by our personal example. If others know we are persons of integrity, they don't have to worry about our motives. Perhaps one of the biggest benefits of integrity is trust and trust is the single most important factor in our personal and professional lives. Without trust what do you really have? Nothing! Who can we trust? We can trust persons of integrity. We gain trust when we exemplify solid character and prove ourselves to be trustworthy.

When you earn people's trust you gain their confidence and are in a position to become a positive influence. The more influence you have the more you can powerfully and positively impact others for Christ. In the end you either bend your conduct to conform to God's moral principles or you bend your principles to conform to your conduct. God wants our theology to determine our morality, not the other way around. A biblical worldview leads to a consistent Christian lifestyle.

The road to integrity is not an easy one but it's the only one worth traveling on because it's the only one that ultimately takes you where you want to go. When you are tempted to take short-cuts, integrity will keep you on the correct path. When you think about it, integrity is one of our best friends. When you are unfairly criticized by others it keeps you going and helps you to take the high road of not returning evil for evil. When other people offer valid criticisms, integrity will help you to listen, learn, change and grow so you don't repeat the same mistakes over and over.

The best way to guard your integrity is to decide in advance that you will never sell or surrender your integrity. *For what could be more important than seeking to please the Lord by thinking and acting in a way that is consistent with His Word?* Honesty can become a godly habit that becomes ingrained in our lives by consistently thinking, saying and doing the right thing. None of us are sinless, but over time we all need to make progress in sinning less which translates into greater consistency in doing the right things. A big part of our integrity is learning to follow through on the commitments and promises that we have made to God and others. Making repeated good decisions helps to establish godly habits and godly habits lead to happiness and success from God's perspective. When we learn to do the things we have to do because we have to do them, the day will come when we can do the things we want to do because we have learned to enjoy doing what is pleasing to God.

## **Do you want to develop more integrity so you can have more influence with others?**

If so, where do we begin? The place to begin is to make a strong commitment to develop an effective strategy to develop Christ-like character and conduct. We need to learn to take full responsibility for our character flaws and short-comings. The more we are open to constructive feedback of others, the more we improve and the more progress we make in becoming a person of integrity.

## **What decision does God want us to make with respect to becoming a person of integrity?**

- I want to make a life long commitment to increasingly becoming a person of integrity.
- I commit myself to being truthful, reliable, trustworthy, honest and consistently kind to others.
- I will keep the confidences of others and I will seek to provide a godly example to others.
- I will seek to understand, embrace and live out God's moral standards revealed in the Bible.
- I will not seek to please God in my own strength but I will daily submit to His Spirit's control.
- I will do everything not for selfish reasons but to help others for the greater glory of God.

Many succeed momentarily by what they know. (Understanding)

Some succeed temporarily by what they do. (Action)

Few succeed permanently by what they are. (Character)

## **Making Integrity Work for You – Questions for Consideration**

1. Is it too much to ask that we be “simper fidelis” – always faith – always true to one another?
2. What are some of the main deterrents to “keeping our word”?
3. How can we talk about living a life of integrity if we subscribe to relative morality?
4. How would you define integrity? What is it? What is it not?
5. Is integrity similar to or different from “promise keeping”?
6. What does the Bible have to say about integrity?
7. What does our management of finances have to do with integrity?
8. How can we identify the proper moral standard for a life of integrity?
9. What flaws exist in your own integrity armor? How can others help you?

10. Some roads seems right but aren't. Can you name a few?
11. How are we to determine the path on which we will travel?
12. How does "secular humanism" pose a threat to living a life of integrity?
13. Is integrity in living one of your most sought after virtues? If not, what is?
14. What is the "north star" which guides us along the path of integrity?
15. Is integrity optional or essential? Why or why not?
16. What would society be like if we all lived lives of integrity?
17. What happens when integrity becomes merely an option rather than a mandate?
18. What effect does integrity or the lack of it have on the world of work?
19. Can you think of some biblical examples of integrity?
20. How does a focus on integrity improve our vision of life itself?
21. How can the trend toward unethical behavior be reversed?
22. How transparent are you willing to live your life?
23. How did Christ demonstrate His own integrity?
24. Can ideas can you implement in order to grow in your integrity?
25. How can we become persons of integrity if none of us is perfect?