



Integrity

Luke 11:37-54

I don't know if you've ever come across a story I read about a Christian who was general manager of a chain of community newspapers, and his responsibilities included setting advertising policies. At one point he ordered that advertising clients who used a Christian symbol or Bible verse on business cards or stationery would be required to pay cash in advance. His experience was that people who most openly professed to be Christians were his worst-paying accounts.

That's a true story and it illustrates the fact that it isn't just our words that speak out who we are - it's how we live too. I know of people who won't become Christians because they look at how Christians behave and see people who are no better than they are and behaviour they would be surprised at. We need to be people who live what we say we are. This is the area I'm going to explore today and it's something as old as the church itself - and predates it by thousands of years: that how we live speaks volumes about who we are.

One of the characteristics of the early church right up into the early fourth century was that it was illegal in the Roman Empire. Actually Roman society was generally quite tolerant and Christians only experienced bouts of severe persecution, where they got crucified or thrown to the lions, from time to time. Being illegal meant that they had no public face, met in homes, had no specific church buildings and generally had to be low key.

Yet in those centuries, the church of God grew rapidly. How? Because Christians were different. They dared to be different. Sometimes it got them arrested and killed. There are plenty of stories about early martyrs. But usually they were perceived as doing no harm, and their different lifestyle actually attracted people like a magnet. People were fascinated by the difference.

They were different in two ways. First of all they lived different lives. They had a different morality. They were honest. They could be trusted. They had a positive attitude to death, which gave them a positive attitude to life. They weren't superstitious and didn't fear the pagan gods and spirits (paganism relies on fear). People were fascinated by them because their lives were attractive.

The second thing was that where Christians were; things happened. Amazing things. We all know the stories from the New Testament, so let me tell you the story of a Christian called Gregory who was called to lead the church at Neo-Cesarea in the province of Pontus in Asia Minor in the mid 3rd century. The situation was dire. There were only 17 known believers in the city. But the power of God was with him and he got the title of Gregory the Wonderworker for the way in which God used him in healing and deliverance. He stayed there about 30 years, until he died. The church did a survey just before his death and found only 17 people who didn't profess Christ.

Why do I say all this? Because we live in an age where Christians are in a minority and the church of God is struggling and I believe that we need to be people of integrity and a people of power if we are to make a difference to people's lives. The contrast between the early church and today couldn't be greater. We live in a country where the Christian faith is in decline. The people who do the church censuses have recorded a year on year decline in church attendance over the past few decades (attendance is once a fortnight). The current decline is *equivalent to 2,500 stopping every week*

If we look at the reasons why this has happened the researchers suggest some social changes, but at the core we see that people don't think that the Christian faith is not relevant to them. What do you mean not relevant? We know that Jesus is amazing. He's life changing. We know that the Holy Spirit work is in power in people's lives. But look at Churches up and down the country. Do we see that? No. Do the unchurched see that? No. And it comes down to integrity.

What do I mean by integrity. Let's do the dictionary bit. If you are a mathematician or a computer programmer you will have heard of the word *integer*. An integer is a whole number. Integrity is about wholeness. Here's the dictionary definitions.

- a sound, unimpaired, or perfect condition: the integrity of ship's hull - star trek
- the state of being whole, entire, or undiminished: to preserve the integrity of the empire - the Indian Army
- adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honesty.

Integrity isn't a word that is used in Scripture. There just isn't a word for it - but the opposite of integrity looms large. The opposite is - hypocrisy.

One way at which some people look at integrity is to say that we should keep to the 10 commandments and seek to do things by the Good Book. I know lots of Christians that see obedience to God in that way. I was brought up in the type of church where scripture was literally looked at as a set of rules. Yes, we believed in a personal faith in Christ - but that to live properly, we had to do things as the Bible said, to be obedient to God. People who didn't were generally avoided and even shunned.

And that is the faith and position of many evangelical, charismatic and pentecostal Christians today. And they seek to do what the Bible says they should do because they want to be obedient to God. So why is it that we end up with churches and Christians in which people see no integrity and no power?

As we look at Luke 11 we can see the heart of it as we look at the hypocrisy of the scribes and the Pharisees. Now don't be too unkind to the Pharisees. We've always given them a bad press. But they were the people who were the seriously religious people of the day at the time of Jesus. They saw themselves as the defenders of the faith, the defenders of scripture, the people tasked with making sure that the people knew the scriptures. There were different shades of them but they were like modern day evangelicals - they were Bible believing, they sought after personal holiness, they wanted religious experience, they had responsibilities to give tithes and alms, they had real status in the community.

And Jesus wades in to them in Luke 11 and says basically "you think you are wonderful - but you are an absolute disgrace!" And how did they react? They were incensed. For them it was the last straw as far as Jesus was concerned. You see, He was treading on their turf. It was their job to teach the people in the right way - yet they flocked to Jesus to be taught. Why? Because He taught with integrity. The ordinary people loved Him. The word of God was spoken with power and miracles. They could see it. God was with Him. And rather than recognising that, the Scribes and the Pharisees resented Him and now Jesus exposes them for who they are and in this passage we see what integrity isn't and in Jesus, what integrity is.

The most obvious thing the Pharisees did was that they altered their practice of the Word of God so that it suited their needs and prejudices. To the Torah they added their own laws and interpretations of called the Talmud. It was there to ensure that they did not break the law and offend a holy God. It was with the best intentions that it was done but what ended up was legalism - law-keeping. God calls His people to obedience, not law-keeping (legalism). At the core of legalism, and the Pharisees sin, is self. Their laws were there to serve God but Jesus exposes them as what they were - self-seeking. There was no integrity in what they were. Let's see how that was.

Self-Deceiving

"Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. 40 You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? 41 But give what is inside [the dish] to the poor, and everything will be clean for you. 42 "Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, loved practical jokes. Once he sent a telegram to each of twelve friends. All were men of great virtue and respected in society. The telegram said, "Flee at once, your secret is discovered!" Within 24 hours, the story goes, all twelve had left the country!

The problem - on the outside they looked clean but on the inside they were full of greed and wickedness. They looked like wonderful people on the outside. They kept the law religiously. They taught the faith. But on the inside they were morally rotten.

The Queen Mary was the largest ship to cross the oceans when it was launched in 1936. Through four decades and a World War she served until she was retired, anchored as a floating hotel and museum in Long Beach, California. During the conversion, her three massive smokestacks were taken off to be scraped down and repainted. But on the dock they crumbled. Nothing was left of the 3/4 inch steel plate from which the stacks had been formed. All that remained were more than thirty coats of paint that had been applied over the years. The steel had rusted away. Impressive on the outside - but rotten on the inside.

Jesus gives examples. The Pharisees were religious tithers. They always made sure God had His tenth of everything. Yet they were rich and influential and they could have alleviated poverty and need in their towns - but they religiously kept their nine tenths and had no compassion.

And in comes Jesus with no money but compassion and the power of God and behind Him was a procession of changed lives.

We are not called to be religious but to use who we are to show compassion and bring the power and presence of God to people who are lost, who need a friend, who need a Saviour and who need hope.

Because people are looking at the decline of church, they must do some mission. But with what motive? To fill empty buildings? To increase the club? So much modern mission is designed to build up our churches, to fill our bank accounts, to make our worship up. Yet what about God and what about the needs of the people.

My experience of modern evangelical faith is it's often self-seeking and self-promoting. Because it's easy to slip into that. Serving God requires risk, faith and perseverance. Having compassion and love for the lost means getting our hands dirty, committing ourselves to people whose lifestyles we don't like and to realising that they will change us.

I don't think that's the experience of your church so far. You're a new church and God never wants it to be your experience. But it's much easier to be a Pharisee. They started with the best intentions and ended with hypocrisy. God wants you to seek His will - much harder work than just getting a few pat answers from that other people have done before. He wants you to stretch your faith - that can be very difficult when He asks you to do what looks impossible. He wants you to rely on the power of His Spirit - easier said than done. He wants you to have a heart of compassion for the lost. He wants you to make your priority to please Him. Because that's what Jesus did.

Beware the easy option of making church, church politics, legalism and rule-keeping more important than Jesus - because in the end you'll find that all you do is serve yourself. Some of the most common phrases I've heard in the past year is - "we don't think that", "it doesn't help our worship", "I can't do that", "I don't like that".

What about God? What about the lost?

Integrity is not what we do as much as what we are. And what we are, in turn, determines what we do.

Self-Promoting

43 "Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. 44 "Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it."

The Pharisees thought that because their behaviour pleased God that they were really important. In fact, they had all the important seats everywhere. They were spiritual leaders, "men of God". Jesus said they were unmarked graves, whitewashed tombs. What are they? If you go to great cathedrals you'll find they have the graves of the great and good and years ago people used to revere them. The Catholic Church still reveres the graves of saints. In most cathedrals and old churches, bodies are buried everywhere - under the floor, in the graveyard. Most are unmarked because they were the

graves of poor people - nobodies. Nor respected and walked over. Jesus said "You think you are somebody, but to God, you're nobody.

Why? Because they put their needs before anything else. Yet they lived in a society where their importance meant that they could change things. Where they could bring justice for poor nobodies - but they didn't. They were their own club that suited their needs.

Yet Jesus gave up everything - he had a top of the pile job as a carpenter - in order to serve God, have compassion on the poor, walk in the power of God and to die for the likes of us. And God says "go and do the same". People saw the integrity in that and followed Him.

Much of modern church so lacks that integrity. They are clubs in themselves. They have their own music, language, organisations, activities. The average Christian can go through most of their lives never ministering to unbelievers at all because they're busy in church. In fact, most Christians don't have too many unbelieving friends who they are close to. Don't fall into the trap of believing that you and your worship are so important to God that you think that your priority doesn't include a compassion for the lost, a compassion for those who are hurting, a desire for justice and change in your community - because that is part and parcel of your worship and it's hollow without it.

Self-Protecting

"Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also." 46 Jesus replied, "And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them.

The thing about the Talmuds as I said was to clarify the Law so that no-one accidentally broke the law and displeased God. If you look at modern orthodox Jews, they have the most ridiculous number of rules to follow so they don't accidentally sin. It costs them. They wear dour clothes and they seem quite joyless. I know a lot of Christians like that too. And they made sure that others didn't enjoy themselves too! After all, enjoyment means they might actually enjoy something unfortunate and sin. The story is told of one family who took their budgie's swing out of the cage on Sundays so it wouldn't enjoy itself. Laugh you may, but there are plenty of equally daft practices still around today by people wanting to be religious and please God. Pleasing God comes from the heart, not from religious observance. We come to worship because out of love, our desire is to please God, not coming to worship just in case if we didn't God would be annoyed.

It's one thing to do it yourself, but it's another thing to burden others. And the scribes in all their teaching actually made life quite unbearable for the poor who had to do all these religious observances and pay money into the treasury which they didn't have. They burdened them, but didn't help them.

When people come to Christ today, it's Jesus they want and Jesus they need. Frankly, they probably don't need what church throws at them. You all know the stories. Every church has one - or more. Young person comes to Christ. Arrives in church in tatty jeans and T Shirt. Stuffy deacon comes up and says if he wants to worship next week, a suit and tie would be better. Youth never comes again. We seek that people come to Christ and burden them with our baggage rather than give them the freedom that is in Christ.

Self-Honouring

They glorified the prophets but ignored their teachings

47 "Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them. 48 So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. 49 Because of this, God in his wisdom said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.'

One of the things that the Pharisees did was to honour the prophets by building large tombs around traditional grave sites so they could honour the fathers and prophets. It was good to remind people of the teaching of the prophets. I've been studying Isaiah recently. The main message of that prophet was that many of the people outwardly were religious, but inwardly thought and lived as they wanted to. And the Pharisees honoured the prophets and committed the same error as their forefathers.

In the end, the people did not honour the prophets, or their writings (the Word of God). They just honoured themselves. Yet again, Jesus did not honour Himself, but aid, "my meat is to do my Father's will."

Learn this simple fact from this - each generation often commits the same sin as the previous. The same errors and heresies have been around since the 1st Century - few have changed.

The story of the Pharisees has been given to us, not to show us how good we are, but to honour God by not doing the same thing.

And why not?

50 Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, 51 from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all. 52 "Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering." 53 When Jesus left there, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, 54 waiting to catch him in something he might say.

Within 50 years, the temple was in ruins, Jerusalem was destroyed, the leaders persecuted and the people scattered. I don't find it surprising that the church is dying in our generation here in Britain. We have fallen into the sin of the Pharisees.

But it's not all disaster - the church is growing like mad in other parts of the world. it's growing amongst ethnic communities in London and the cities. it's growing particularly amongst the young, particularly in larger towns and cities.? Why? Because they are by and large dynamic new churches, that deal with the issues in life and show that in Jesus they find life, forgiveness, healing, deliverance, wholeness.

So as God plants new shoots, like you, the warning goes out to you to you not to slip into the old ways of hypocrisy, but to walk in integrity. Found yourself in the integrity of Jesus. I looked back at the definition of integrity and in Him, we see how we find integrity:

- a sound, unimpaired, or perfect condition - in Christ, we are accepted as fit for His presence
- the state of being whole, entire, or undiminished - we are mad whole in Christ
- adherence to moral and ethical principles; soundness of moral character; honesty - so let's have the character to match!

Challenge: need to examine ourselves - what are our motives in worship, motives in mission. When people look at us, do they see in us something that is different, exciting, distinctive and attractive. Do they see the presence and power of God with us. let's open ourselves to His Spirit, to clear our motives, to develop that burden for the lost, to use us as people who have a dynamic effect on others' lives.

Let's pray.