



A PEOPLE OF 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.

Last week we saw how we are called to be witnesses of Christ, because God has only chosen us, His people, His church to let others know about Him. And maybe you thought “witnessing isn’t for me. I know what Simon said, and I understand what scripture says, but witnessing is for the Pastor, the Deacons, the keen people – not for me.” Unfortunately (or fortunately) we need to understand this – we ARE His witnesses whether we like it or not. Our lives speak for us when our mouths don’t. What is your life saying?

One of the characteristics of the early church right up into the early fourth century was that it was illegal. Actually Roman society was generally quite tolerant and Christians only experienced bouts of severe persecution, where they got crucified or thrown to the lions. The rest of the time they were tolerated. 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 could they do that without mission and without church buildings? 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 give 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.

Secondly – when they prayed things happened. Their faith was dynamic and this attracted people.

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 if we are to make a difference to people's lives here in Felixstowe.

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. What we say we are does not match our lives. We are not what is written on the tin!

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 a legalistic 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 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 your cup and plate, but inside you are full of violence and evil. 40 Fools! Did not God, who made the outside, also make the inside? 41 But give what is in your cups and plates to the poor, and everything will be ritually clean for you. 42 "How terrible for you Pharisees! You give to God one tenth of the seasoning herbs, such as mint and rue and all the other herbs, but you neglect justice and love for God. These you should practice, without neglecting the others.

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 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.

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.

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. It was the love and the compassion, not doing the right religious thing that made the difference. He acted with integrity.

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.

One of the things that disturbs me with many Christians and mission is that they the solution to declining church in new types of mission the latest programme, or following the latest trend.

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.

But where's the desire to rescue people? Where's the heart of compassion? Too often absent. Programmes and religious behaviour without a love and a passion for people to know Christ is all just as much hypocrisy as the Pharisees.

Integrity is not what we do as much as what we are. And what we are, in turn, determines what we do. God calls us to be not to do. And to be is to be like Jesus – the doing follows. And the doing brings people to Christ – just like Jesus.

➔ Self-Promoting

43 "How terrible for you Pharisees! You love the reserved seats in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces. 44 How terrible for you! You are like unmarked graves which people walk on 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 (and under this floor I'm told!), 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. Let's not fall into the trap of believing that our worship are so important to God that we think that our priority doesn't include a compassion for the lost, a compassion for those who are hurting, a desire for justice and change in our community - because that is part and parcel of your worship and it's hollow without it.

➔ Self-Protecting

45 One of the teachers of the Law said to him, "Teacher, when you say this, you insult us too!" 46 Jesus answered, "How terrible also for you teachers of the Law! You put onto people's backs loads which are hard to carry, but you yourselves will not stretch out a finger to help them carry those loads."

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 person comes up and says if he wants to worship next week, then he could find a comb! 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. But 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 said, "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. People have been where we are now and lived to tell the tale. I haven't got time to explore verses 51-54 but the past stands as a warning and encouragement. The Pharisees didn't listen – and where are they now? But there were those that heeded His word and followed Jesus and the church of God grew powerfully.

I believe that God wants us to be planters of new shoots in Walton. But in doing so we need to be people of integrity – like Christ, and to not live in the way of hypocrisy. Let's find ourselves 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 made 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.