

THE INTEGRITY FACTOR

2 Corinthians 1:3-12; 2:14-17

What determines how we interact and relate to other people? If someone behaves in a despicable way toward us and is very arrogant and demanding and totally rude, how do we respond? On the other hand if someone is very gracious and thoughtful and accommodating to us, how do we respond, in that case? Is our response any different for these two situations? Probably!

Are other people able to “pull your chain” and manipulate your behavior, or are you able to determine your actions based on what is appropriate and based on what your values are? If people were to observe your behavior in these hypothetical situations, would they think they are observing two different persons? While we don’t typically characterize this type of disparity as an integrity issue that is essentially what is on display. If we simply “reflect” what is around us, then we are like a weather vane that turns with the wind. Ideally, we should want to be a directional arrow that points others in the right direction.

The relationship Paul had with the church at Corinth was adverse or even tumultuous. Apparently, between the time of his first letter and the second letter, the church was in turmoil because of false teachers who came in and created a lot of acrimonious feeling in the church toward Paul. After the first letter, Paul had returned to Corinth and the strained relationship resulted in them treating him very harshly. He left and wrote a letter of reprimand (no copy available) which Titus delivered and then he stayed in Corinth to help the church get back on track. Apparently, Titus was successful in helping them and, later, he was able to visit with Paul and give a report that things had greatly improved. It was following this that Paul wrote the letter that we know as Second Corinthians.

Paul could have just written them off as a bunch of rebels and jerks, but he did not treat them in the same way they treated him. Instead, he continued to care for them and when he had some assurance that they would listen resumed teaching them the principles of the Kingdom. This approach speaks well of Paul’s integrity. He realized that he needed to act based on who he was in Christ and what God had called him to do.

Live for Christ and Minister to Others: 1:3-7

³ Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ. ⁶ But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer; ⁷ and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are *sharers* of our comfort. 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 (NASB95)

Paul started his letter with a word of praise to God. If we would always do this in the things in which we are involved, it would help us keep our priorities in proper order. We need to remind ourselves that our lives should not be about us and, contrary to what we often hear; it is not about other people. Instead, we must focus on God as revealed in Christ. The care for others (which is important) will follow naturally as we respond to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Paul was quick to acknowledge God as the Source for everything good in life. He praised God, first of all, because He is the Father of the Lord Jesus, because He is the God of mercy, and because He is the Source of comfort for each of us. All of us need comfort at some time in our life.

Sometimes we find that the closer we walk with God the more the world rejects us. That rejection can result in suffering or tribulation. Sometimes it is physical suffering and at other

times it can be emotional suffering. We are told elsewhere in Paul's writings that "all who will live Godly in Christ Jesus will suffer tribulation." When we do experience tribulation, we can expect comfort from God. That's great, even if it ended there. We have trouble and God comforts us. But it doesn't have to (and should not) end there. We can learn from the experience of how important it is to receive encouragement and comfort when we are down. When we have experienced problems and have known the comfort that comes from God, then we should then be in perfect position to pass that kind of comfort on to others who are hurting.

Paul said that the sufferings of Christ are ours. He did not mean that we are suffering the same things that Jesus suffered but that we are suffering because we belong to Christ. Another way to look at this statement is that as Christians, we are the body of Christ. Because of this, we could logically argue that when we suffer, then Christ also suffers. Consequently, Christ knows what we are experiencing and, therefore, knows how to comfort us when we are experiencing tribulation.

In verse six, Paul told them that the afflictions he had experienced were for their encouragement and salvation and the encouragement he had received should be encouragement for them. This was his way of telling them that they would also have afflictions as a result of persecution and they could see, by Paul's example, that such problems can be overcome and that the promises of God are sure. We see this promise in that Jesus told His disciples that He would send the Comforter Who would come along side of them to encourage and comfort.

I believe that it helps us to see the problems we endure as a means to put self to death – they can be seen as more of the suffering of Christ with which we identify when we say that we are crucified with Christ. It is part of the ongoing "taking up our cross daily" and following the example of Christ. As we do this, then God's grace will flow out from us to bring encouragement, consolation, and comfort to others in the same way that we are comforted by God.

Live in God's Strength: 1:8-11

⁸For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came *to us* in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; ⁹ indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; ¹⁰ who delivered us from so great a *peril of death*, and will deliver *us*, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us, ¹¹ you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through *the prayers of many*. 2 Corinthians 1:8-11 (NASB95)

The problem with problems is that many times, we just don't have the ability to deal with the troubles we encounter. Many times when we hear of someone overcoming great problems it gives us encouragement to not give up when we encounter the inconveniences of life. We need to practice on the small things and be in the habit of overcoming obstacles so we can properly handle the larger problems that come along every so often. Paul could use his own life as a series of examples of having had problems that were so intense he literally did not have the strength to go on. He had been sentenced to death and could see no way to escape. In these trials he learned that even though our ability and strength have limits, God knows no limit. He learned to NOT trust in himself but to trust in God. His own past experience gave testimony to the fact that, at the time he wrote this letter, he was walking in such faith and he had confident hope that God's power would be there when he needed it in the future.

Paul gave God the glory for the deliverance he experienced; however, Paul acknowledged the importance of other people praying for him. We fail to realize how important that ministry really is. If we knew how powerful prayer is, then we would see more Christians

engaged in it. Those who do pray and see their prayers answered respond in thanksgiving to God. Often we will pray for something and when it happens we sort of dismiss it as something that was going to happen anyway and, in doing so, we fail to express our appreciation to God for all the good things He has done.

Live So God Approves 1:12; 2:14-17

¹² For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness [*simplicity or integrity*] and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you. 2 Cor 1:12

¹⁴ But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. ¹⁵ For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; ¹⁶ to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? ¹⁷ For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God. 2 Corinthians 2:14-17 (NASB95)

We've been focusing on how we react to problems and afflictions. We can condition ourselves to views such things as ways to grow to be more Christlike and to expect and count on the encouragement we will be given by the Holy Spirit and by our fellow Christians. We also see the need to encourage others in their times of troubles and afflictions. That is just one side of the coin.

What about situations in which we are doing well and having great success? How do we react and what actions do we take during such times as these? What about when others have success and are doing well? How do we react then? Do we see the "good" times as opportunities to grow to be more Christlike? Do we seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit when things are great? Do we encourage others to seek the Lord when they are successful?

Integrity would suggest that our objectives, our overall purpose in life and the approach we take would not change because of the circumstance in which we find ourselves. We must live in such a way that we please God in the hard times and the easy times, in the afflictions and in the victories. Paul told them that his conscience gave testimony that his conduct was such that God would be pleased. This was a reason for rejoicing rather than proud confidence. Some of the attributes that he mentioned would provide a good checklist for us to use to see how we are doing in this area.

The first thing he mentioned was simplicity. The more modern translations render this as holiness. Holiness means being separated from the way of the world. In today vernacular we would render the Greek word used in the text as meaning "without pretense" or "without hypocrisy." We might even say, "what you see is what you get." This is getting down to the meaning of integrity. We don't act one way at church and behave a different way at work or on the golf course. We say what we mean and mean what we say.

The next attribute was godly sincerity. The word sincerity has its roots in the idea of purity. The adjective "godly" would tell us of the extent of that purity; that is, it would be the highest level of purity you can imagine. The literal meaning of the Greek word is "found pure when unfolded and examined in the light of the sun." This is getting down of the concept of what are the underlying motives that drive our behaviors. When we start peeling back the layers of our lives, will we find the right motives or will we find selfishness and pride? Is this not also an integrity issue?

The third attribute is the grace of God. This attribute is contrasted to the wisdom of the carnal mind. Most of us have memorized the definition of grace to be "unmerited favor." It has a broader usage and carries the concept of "that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, sweetness, charm, and loveliness."

Paul used these attributes to describe his behavior in dealing with all people and especially with those in Corinth. He essentially told them that he had been open (no hypocrisy), he had pure motives (sincere) and that he was guided by what would be pleasing to God and brings joy to Him.

Paul had just shared with them the persecutions, affliction, rejections, and all kinds of problems he had encountered and yet he was confident that victory was the ultimate outcome because he was in Christ. Many have difficulty saying “Thanks be to God who causes us to win” when we are in the middle of hard times and there is little or no evidence that we are winning.

When we live our lives in such a way, what do you think the reaction of other people is to such a testimony and witness? Such a witness affects people in different ways. Many will rejoice and praise God and think that such a testimony is great. Other will react negatively and may even strike out against the person who is relating what has happened in his or her life simply because of the strong conviction such a witness brings to those who have rejected Christ and have convinced themselves that there is nothing to all this talk about being saved and being filled with the Spirit and having prayers answered. As Paul related to them, to one it is an aroma of life and to the other it is an aroma of death.

Paul ends his comments on this subject with a comparison of those who preach the gospel for personal gain versus those who preach regardless of any earthly reward and, consequently, would simply tell people what they wanted to hear and thus avoid the persecution that comes by from speaking the whole counsel of God. He asked an important question: “Who is adequate for these things?” In the very next verse, he makes a seemingly bold statement: “For we are.” Most translations renders this as “For we are not like others ...” If we change the punctuation in that verse, then we see that Paul is asserting that he is adequate and it sounds as if he is writing his own letter of recommendation which is discussed at the beginning of Chapter three. We have to look ahead to chapter three and verse five to find the full answer to his question: “Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as *coming* from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God.” That testimony also speaks of integrity since there was no delusion that he should get any credit for what God was accomplishing through him.