

## **INTEGRITY**

### **Being at one with ourselves – examining our Motives Zechariah 7:1-14**

Most everyone would agree that integrity is very important. People need integrity and relationships do not work without integrity. Some have said that it is the absolute “bottom line” of everything about a person. If one does not have integrity, then nothing much else really matters. We believe this, but do we all have the same definition or concept of integrity?

What is integrity? Typically these words come to mind when we think about integrity: Virtue, honesty, righteousness, character and may be purity. Let’s leave those ideas and look more basically at the word itself. For example, there are a couple of words that come from the same root: Integer and Integrate. An integer is a whole number. To integrate is to make many parts into one. The concept is that being intact or whole. The idea of being unified probably captures the basic idea of integrity better than some of the other adjectives.

Sometimes we can get a better understanding of a concept if we look at the opposite of the idea. What would be the opposite of integrity? Aside from the obvious adjectives of dishonesty, one might think about terms like fragmented, divided, adulterated, unfocused.

Many of you are familiar with the “shema” of Deuteronomy 6:4 which begins “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: The literal rendering is “Listen Israel, Jehovah God Jehovah One” which could be put in reasonable grammatical form and it would say, “Listen Israel: Regarding Jehovah God, Jehovah is One.”

Basically, we are told: Hear and heed what God says. Know Who God is -- His character is that He is One. He is at one with Himself. He is not divided or schizophrenic. He is consistent and is the perfect example of the meaning of “integrity.” We are to relate to Him in oneness in all of our being - body, soul, and spirit. We cannot be as He is - ONE - if we divide ourselves so that our relationship to God affects only the spiritual aspects of life and not our intellect, emotions and will. We should not stop short of bringing the physical and emotional parts of ourselves under the Lordship of Jesus.

There was a question that came up in the time of Zechariah that was related to the issue of integrity. Those asking the question did not realize that integrity had anything to do with what they wanted to know. We find the report of the question and God’s response through the prophet in Zechariah chapter 7.

1 In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the LORD came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, the month of Kislev. 2 The people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regem-Melech, together with their men, to entreat the LORD 3 by asking the priests of the house of the LORD Almighty and the prophets, "Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?"

When Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed at the beginning of the Babylonian captivity, the Temple had been torn down in the fifth month. As a way to remember what had happened and to demonstrate their grief over the destruction, they declare a fast on the anniversary of the loss of

the Temple. This observance had gone on for the 70 years of the captivity and was still being observed nearly two decades since many of the captives had returned. Now that the temple was being rebuilt, was it necessary to continue this mourning and fasting practice during the month? That doesn't sound like an unreasonable question and may be similar to questions that might come up in churches today. For example: You have a lot churches (most of them) who do not meet on Sunday evenings. So maybe a question might come up - should we continue to meet for Sunday Evening Services? Some churches observe the Lord's Supper every Sunday, but we observe it only once per quarter. So, should we observe the Lord's Supper more often? Many churches have started having all contemporary music. Should we just have a praise team (rather than a choir and orchestra) since that seems to be working for the fastest growing churches? Lot of church don't have Sunday School any more - they have small groups that meet during the week. Do we need to continue to have Sunday School or start small groups that meet in homes? We could save a bunch of money by not having to build more Sunday School rooms. (Trust me, I did not bring those questions up to debate them, but simple to point out that we have a lot of questions many time about what is the appropriate practice in our worship services.)

We all have opinions about such things, but God had an answer - actually, it was a question for those who raised the question and for all the Jews.

4 Then the word of the LORD Almighty came to me: 5 "Ask all the people of the land and the priests, 'When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months for the past seventy years, was it really for me that you fasted? 6 And when you were eating and drinking, were you not just feasting for yourselves? 7 Are these not the words the LORD proclaimed through the earlier prophets when Jerusalem and its surrounding towns were at rest and prosperous, and the Negev and the western foothills were settled?'"

In other words, the Lord was saying to the people "If you will answer my question, then you will find the answer to your own question." He went on to say, "This was the same question I raised with you BEFORE you went into captivity."

What is the Lord questioning about the people? Their INTEGRITY! Why did they do what they did in their worship practices? That is a good question, not only for them, but also for us. Why do we do what we do in our worship practices? If we can get a handle on the question of integrity in worship, then we will be able to sort through all these marginal issues of the "ritualistic" expression of our worship. We need to stop majoring on the minors.

Several years ago, I skimmed through a book on worship by D. A. Carson (writer and professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the Chicago area). One of the discussion points was that we try to compartmentalize our worship experience to a Sunday morning (evening) worship service. The contention of the argument was that all of life should be an expression of worship to God. So if this is really the way it should be for Christians, then the issue of integrity in worship now becomes an issue of integrity in ALL OF LIFE. Now the question that the Lord raised could be restated to "Why do you do what you do." Your formal (ritualistic) testimony may be that you are a born-again child of God, you have been saved by the blood of the Lamb, you recognize Jesus as Lord of your life and you obey His commandments as an expression of your love for Him. If you are at ONE with yourself, then what you say and what you do and what you think

should ALL be in alignment or agreement. You are not fragmented, you are not conflicted in your walk and your talk - in other words, you have integrity.

One of the questions raised in a commentary on this passage is “are the motives for worship and Christian service self-centered or God-centered?” My guess is that for many people, the motives are neither, but it happens simply because it is on the calendar. It is my Sunday to work as a greeter. It is my Wednesday to work in the Nursery. It is Sunday morning, therefore, we are going to church. This song is in the order of worship and I sing it. Because it is Tuesday, I read that day’s entry in the devotion literature. Many sing the songs and are not even conscious of the words. We read a Bible passage and never consider the implications for our lives - but we did our “daily Bible reading.” This is superficiality. What motivates us?

In the case of the Jews who observed the fast associated with the destruction of the temple, they probably were not doing it for self-serving reason (except to fit in and be part of the group) but simply because everybody else was doing it and everybody else was doing it because it on the calendar. Their concern and basic motivation was “reputation” or maybe “pride.” In many cases, they were not doing it “for the Lord.” Acts of worship and service that are void of spiritual meaning are worthless in God’s sight. Our motives must be that of obedience and worship that flows from the heart toward the Lord and not for ourselves or simply as part of a routine.

If ritualistic worship and service are not what God is looking for in His people, then what it is? The same things that God had told the pre-Babylonian Jews were still on God’s agenda and He repeated them through Zechariah in this later generation.

8 ¶ And the word of the LORD came again to Zechariah: 9 "This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. 10 Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.’

There were four things that are representative of the kinds of things God expects from those who love Him.

True Justice: This admonition was likely intended for judges and officials who would hear cases of disputes brought before them. People have a tendency to let personal preferences and respect of persons influence their judgements more than the truth of the facts. This admonition could apply to each of us as we consider things that come across on a daily basis. We make “judgements” all the time. We find ourselves approving or condemning on the basis of many things other than the facts.

Mercy and Compassion to one another: Hosea 6:6 - For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings. 1John 3:17 - But whoso has this world's goods, and sees his brother having need, and does not have compassion for him, how does the love of God dwell in him? Bottom line: If we are more interested in getting to church on time than we are in helping someone with car trouble that we see on the way the church, then we have our priorities messed up.

Do not oppress people: The passage is specifically directed toward not oppressing those who are defenseless, we can legitimately extend this to everybody. The implication is that people are not likely to oppress the powerful since they can retaliate. However, fear of retaliation should not be the restraint for what we do or don’t do. We should be able to say that the love of Christ

constrains me. (2 Cor 5:14)

Do not think evil of others: Evil thoughts precede evil deeds. If we imagine evil in our hearts against someone, then we are guilty of the deed in God's assessment. This was what Christ was talking about when He taught that looking on a woman with lust has committed adultery with her. If we hate someone in our heart and think murderous thoughts then we are guilty of murder.

What are the consequences of ignoring what God expects us to do? It has been said that past behavior is the best indicator of future behavior. So we could ask ourselves what God did in the past for those who ignored his expectations and thought that religious ritual was what pleased God. The answer is clear in the message God gave to Zechariah.

11 "But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. 12 They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the LORD Almighty was very angry. 13 "'When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,' says the LORD Almighty. 14 'I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations, where they were strangers. The land was left so desolate behind them that no one could come or go. This is how they made the pleasant land desolate.'"

Does this apply to us in today's world? Are we, as individuals and as a nation, any different in our behavior from what we see was occurring with the people Judah? If not, then can we expect any different outcome in the long run if we continue to get all caught up on "things religious" and ignore true justice, don't show compassion, oppress or allow oppression to happen, and let our minds become filled with evil imaginations?

The formula for success that Moses gave the Israelites before they entered the promised land is found in the shema and it started with the word "Hear." The opposite of that is seen in Zechariah 7:11: Refused to pay attention, turned their backs, stopped their ears. The consequence of not listening is becoming hardhearted. The only time they would call upon God was when they thought they had to have help - dire circumstances. Surprise! God was not listening because they were not listening. The outcome was desolation to the nation and to the land in which they lived.

So should we do this or do that? First answer the question: "Why are we doing this or that?" Realize that God is more interested in true worship which is expressed in obedience to His word as an expression of our love for Him.