

Decisions, Decisions

Proverbs 11.3

Scripture reading: Job 2.1-10

I was only 21 years old when I became a pastor. Fresh out of Bible college, I accepted the call to Berean Baptist Church to be their music pastor. It was a part-time position that promised to be full-time within two years.

Berean was a rapidly growing church in an upper class neighbourhood of Kalamazoo, MI. At that time, there were about 600 people attending the church – which presented a problem because the church’s auditorium only fit 350. There were three full-time pastors, plus myself (part-time) and an apprentice on staff.

Our ministry at Berean took off in ways we could have never imagined. It was almost like magic – everything we tried turned to gold. The choir grew so large it couldn’t fit on the platform. The orchestra was a delightful mix of beginners and semi-professional players. And then there was a children’s choir, and a junior youth choir, and a ladies’ choir, and a men’s chorus, and a drama team, and a special touring group we called the Berean Singers – out of which came the Berean Quartet. We were riding a wave of success that we interpreted to be God’s blessing, and we thought it would never end.

But it did end. Like a wave crashing violently onto a reef . . . it ended. When the two years were up, and my position was supposed to become full-time, three deacons informed me of a change in plans. My position would remain part-time, and the church would instead focus on building a larger auditorium.

I was shocked and deeply disappointed. But it got worse when I discovered that the deacons had acted without authorisation from the pastors. The leadership was now divided . . . and that division soon ripped through the entire church. People were angry . . . in revolt . . . and they were coming to me . . . a 23 year old kid . . . to vent.

I wanted to vent, too. And I admit I did lose my cool a couple of times in private with friends. I was hurt, confused, afraid. I prayed to God for direction and I read Proverbs to find it.

One verse stood out to me:

Proverbs 11.3 (NIV) The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity.

There was my answer. Integrity would guide me. Do right, and I couldn’t go wrong. I understood from this verse that reacting impulsively was not the way to go. I had to be true and honest, living as graciously in turmoil as I did in triumph.

I can’t say that I succeeded perfectly – I have some regrets from that ordeal. But I’m glad to say that God protected the church so that it not only survived our departure, but thrived in the long run.

Have you faced a crisis that left you not knowing what to do? What to say? Perhaps you are in that sort of situation right now. Integrity is the answer – just like the beam of a torch piercing through the darkness.

Even if you aren't in crisis, integrity is still essential. In all your choices, whether emotional or routine, let integrity be your guide.

Sermon in a Sentence: **Wherever you go, let a sameness of godly character lead the way.**

[Pray]

We all make choices every day. Most are small – like what colour socks do I want to wear. But some are big – like “is this the right person to marry?” Usually the big choices are ones we take some time thinking over – “What career should I pursue?” “Where should I live?” “Where should I go to church?” But the choices that shape the course of our life are often the ones made on an impulse.

What kinds of choices do we make on an impulse?

- Whether to tell the truth or lie.
- Whether to react in rage or in grace.
- Whether to speak our mind or hold our tongue.
- Whether to indulge a sinful thought or turn away.

These impulsive choices risk becoming a downward spiral. One lie leads to another lie, which leads to another lie.

That's why daily integrity is indispensable as a guide. **Wherever you go, let a sameness of godly character lead the way.**

We're going to approach this topic from two directions. Firstly, we want to explore what integrity means. Secondly, we want to think about how integrity looks in our day-to-day life.

In case you are following the outline on the back of the bulletin, we'll get to that in a little while. First, let's explore Proverbs 11.3 and define integrity.

Proverbs 11:3 (ESV)

³The **integrity** of the upright guides them, but the **crookedness** of the treacherous destroys them.

Integrity is set in contrast to crookedness. This means integrity is a straight path – no twists or detours. It is not hard to predict the behaviour of a person who has integrity. They'll stay the same.

The Hebrew word translated “integrity” in Proverbs 11.3 is used only four other times in the Old Testament. All of those times are in the book of Job.

Let's look at these for additional clues as to what this word means.

Job 2:3 (NKJV)

³Then the LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered My servant Job, that *there is* none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil? And still he holds fast to his **integrity**, although you incited Me against him, to destroy him without cause.”

Now it is one thing to always track straight and another to be on the right track. I had a maths teacher who boasted that he was the fairest teacher in the school. Do you know why? Because he hated all of his students equally. Fair enough that he was consistent, but he was consistently bad.

Integrity defines a particular straight track – not just any track. Job was blameless and upright. He feared God and he shunned evil. That’s the track of integrity.

Job 2:9 (NKJV)

⁹ Then his wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast to your **integrity**? Curse God and die!”

Job had suffered immeasurable loss – his wealth, his property, his children, his health. Now his own wife is despairing, yet Job persists in integrity.

Job 1:21 (ESV)

²¹ And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”

Even when Job’s closest friends accuse him of lying, he still persists with the same story.

Job 27:5 (NKJV)

⁵ Far be it from me That I should say you are right; Till I die I will not put away my **integrity** from me.

So we’ve seen that integrity is straight, not crooked. That it is blameless and righteous. And that it is persistent. Lastly, we learn from Job that it is not afraid of scrutiny.

Job 31:6 (NKJV)

⁶ Let me be weighed on honest scales, That God may know my **integrity**.

The person with integrity has nothing to hide, so they are happy to be transparent with people and with God.

Do you have integrity? Are you tracking persistently up the straight path of blamelessness and righteousness? Do you have nothing to hide?

Let me simplify the definition with reference to Vine’s Expository Dictionary. Integrity means completeness. This is an important concept, because tracking straight is not something any sinful human can achieve by mere determination. Completeness is received in redemption through Jesus Christ. This completeness, in turn, inspires and enables strength and stamina.

Completeness is strong because it stands against anything that might allure or threaten. If our stomach is full, our will power is strong to say “no” to the allure of a slice of chocolate cake. Likewise, when we are complete in or full of God and His righteousness, we will be strong to keep our heads when trials and temptations buffet us.

Completeness is also stamina. Stamina is staying the course for the long haul. When Plan A is perfect, there’s no need for a Plan B. True integrity never lacks for answers or direction.

Are you complete? If so, then Proverbs 11.3 says that you will be guided. If not, then your inconsistency – going this way and that on your own impulses – will destroy you.

That's the first part of this sermon. Now that we have defined integrity from Proverbs 11.3, let's move on to the second part: how integrity looks in our day-to-day living. **Wherever you go, let a sameness of godly character lead the way.**

There are three levels of sameness. (We are now looking at the outline in your bulletin.)

1. Sameness between what you say

Proverbs 19:1 (ESV)

¹Better is a poor person who walks in his **integrity** than one who is crooked in speech and is a fool.

Do we ever say one thing to one person, but another thing to another person? That is crooked speech – the opposite of integrity.

There are some unflattering labels for crooked speech.

Gossip is crooked speech. It is telling a story about someone that we wouldn't say to the person themselves.

Profanity is crooked speech. It is using language around people that we would never use around Jesus Christ.

Lies are crooked speech. It is saying something different to others than what we know to be true in our heart.

I don't have to tell you that crooked speech is very common . . . and becoming more so. Gone are the days when a man could be taken at his word. Now everything has to be by contract.

In a survey of 2,624 readers, Reader's Digest determined that not many people have integrity. Here's what people admitted to (the real numbers are no doubt higher):

- 63% called in sick to work when not ill.
- 63% took something from their company for personal use.
- 71% purposely drive over the speed limit whenever they think they will not get caught.
- 71% lied to a friend to keep from hurting their feelings.
- 32% lied to their spouse about the cost of a purchase.
- 37% used illegally downloaded or copied music.
- 28% lied to their spouse about a relationship with another person.¹

Not very impressive statistics – especially when you think about the kind of person who buys Reader's Digest. Imagine what the statistics would be for the readership of a racier magazine.

Wherever you go, let a sameness of godly character lead the way. That begins with a sameness in what we say.

What is the character of your speech? Sameness? Or crookedness?

¹"How Honest Are You?" Reader's Digest (January 2004)

2. Sameness between what you say and do

The oft quoted parental adage, “Don’t do as I do, do as I say” is a crock. We have a name for people who say one thing, but do another: hypocrite. Hypocritical parenting doesn’t work.

Integrity means that what we do agrees with what we say. This brings three benefits according to Proverbs.

Proverbs 10:9 (ESV)

⁹ Whoever **walks in integrity** walks securely, but he who makes his ways crooked will be found out.

Hypocrites have to cover their tracks – the fear of being found out increases their stress level. But the person with integrity has nothing to fear.

Proverbs 20:7 (ESV)

⁷ The righteous who **walks in his integrity**— blessed are his children after him!

One of the principles of teaching is that lessons are more easily caught than taught. I can demonstrate this to you. Think about the teacher that influenced you the most when you were growing up. What do you remember better – the words they said? Or the life they lived? Their explanations? Or their example?

When parents have integrity, their children are much more likely to follow in their footsteps – and reap the benefits of following the Lord.

Proverbs 28:6 (ESV)

⁶ Better is a poor man who **walks in his integrity** than a rich man who is crooked in his ways.

Do you want the good life? Integrity, not money is the secret.

The local church in a small town called a new pastor. The pastor went to the local supermarket for some groceries. The checkout chick took his money and gave him his change . . . but she gave him \$.50 too much. The pastor started to leave, but then turned back to the girl and said, “I think you’ve given me an extra \$.50” and he returned the coin. What she said next both surprised and humbled the pastor. “I did that on purpose. I wanted to find out if your sermons are worth listening to. Now that I see you are an honest man, I’ll be in church on Sunday to hear what you have to say.”

There are many people who have turned their back on God and Christianity because they experienced a Christian who said one thing, but did another. Sameness between what we do and say is the way we influence other people for good, or for evil – and this begins with our own family, where hypocrisy is impossible to hide.

We come now to the third level of sameness. This one is non-negotiable. It is not enough to have a sameness between what we say and a sameness between what we say and do. You must go on to a . . .

3. Sameness between what you say and do and read

When I say “read”, I am talking about the Bible. The Bible – God’s Word – defines the solitary track of integrity.

Proverbs 13:6 (ESV)

⁶ **Righteousness** guards him whose way is blameless, but sin overthrows the wicked.

There are a million ways to lose integrity, but only one way to keep it. The real battle is fought in the heart of our minds – not with what we say, or even what we do, but with how we think. Our thoughts drive our words and our behaviour.

This is where the disconnect begins, where integrity is lost. All sinful humans are adept at putting on a front – giving the impression to other people that they are something that they are not.

Tim Challies, in this book **The Next Story**, gives an disturbing, but not surprising, example of crookedness in thought.

In 2006, America Online made an epic misjudgement. As part of a research project ... the company made available to the public a massive amount of data culled from ... the search history of 650,000 users over a three-month period. This totalled some 21 million searches.

Before AOL released the data, they changed all the user names into anonymous user numbers. But it didn't take long before those numbers were linked to real names. AOL realized its mistake and withdrew the data, but the search histories had already been copied and uploaded elsewhere on the Internet.

Challies offers the following summary based on AOL's mistake:

It was possible to reconstruct a person's life, at least in part, from what they searched for over a period of time What is remarkable about these searches is the way people transition seamlessly from the normal and mundane to the outrageous and perverse One user went from searching for preteen pornography to searching for games appropriate for a church youth group. Others, spurned by lovers, sought out ways of exacting revenge, while others grappled with ... cheating on their spouses. Our searches are a penetrating window into our hearts.

Challies concludes with some challenging questions: "What does your data trail say about you? Would you be willing for your spouse to see it? Your parents? Your pastor? Your God?"²

Proverbs 23:7 (NKJV)

⁷ For as he thinks in his heart, so *is* he.

Your thought life is the true test of your integrity. Is there a sameness between what you think, what you say, and what you do? Most importantly, is there a sameness between what you think and what God says in His Word.

²Tim Challies, *The Next Story* (Zondervan, 2011), pp. 176-178

Romans 12:2 (ESV)

² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is **the will of God**, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

We come now to the point of this message. Christians sometimes talk about wanting to discover God's Will – as if it is something mystical. But the will of God is actually very plain from God's Word. The reason we so often miss it is because we expect it to give us specific guidance on what university to attend, or what job to take, or what person to marry. But the will of God is more about who we should be than about what we should do.

Proverbs 11:3 (ESV)

³ The **integrity** of the upright **guides** them, but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them.

With a sameness between what you say, do and read in God's Word, you will be in God's Will wherever you go.

There is a popular Christian song out right now that gives a different message to what we've looked at today.

My life has led me down this path that's ever winding,
through every twist and turn, I'm always finding
that I am lost again
Tell when this road will ever end.

Give me a revelation
Show me what to do
'cause I've been trying
to find my way
I haven't got a clue.

Tell me should I stay here
Or do I need to move?
Give me a revelation
I've got nothing without You
I've got nothing without You.

My point is that we shouldn't be asking for a revelation, because God has already given it.

Micah 6:8 (ESV)

⁸ He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

In a word, integrity.

Wherever you go, let a sameness of godly character lead the way.

I began this message with an illustration from my early experience in the ministry. I want to conclude with a story from John MacArthur. His test of integrity was more severe than mine.

I first began to appreciate how difficult the struggle can be when I began in the ministry as a young man in my twenties. I had been in the pastorate for barely a month when I was asked to perform a wedding for a girl in our church who was planning to marry an unbeliever. In a meeting of the church board, some of the leaders urged me to do the wedding because the girl's father was an influential man. A lot was at stake, they said. We might lose this family from the church if I declined.

I said, "But I can't do that. I can't do what Scripture clearly forbids. Believers are not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers. Second Corinthians 6:14."

They were already prepared for that. They replied, "Well, OK. We understand your feelings. We know a minister from somewhere else who will come in and do it, so that this girl can be married in the church."

I asked them, "But whose church is this? Is this *your* church to be used at your discretion, or is this *Christ's* church?"

They replied to their great credit, "You're right; we can't do it. This is Christ's church."

That was the Rubicon for Grace Community Church. That was the moment when the future of our congregation was decided. Yes, an entire family left, and several other people withdrew their membership over that incident as well. But we decided as elders that day that we would not only preach the Word of God; we would expect it to be lived out in the corporate life of the church.

That sort of obedience to the Word of God has shaped and molded our ministry over the years. It shows up even in the way we worship. We don't entertain people. We don't have a dog-and-pony show. We gather to worship God, to exalt Christ, and to hear the Word of God preached. We practice church discipline as outlined in Matthew 18:15–20. We seek to obey what Scripture teaches, no matter how politically incorrect or out of fashion it might seem. And at a time when many churches are becoming more and more like the world, our goal is to be conformed more and more to the standard set forth in the Scriptures. God has blessed that, and I am convinced it is because our elders have sought to uphold the standard of biblical integrity at every level of leadership.³

³MacArthur, J. (2002). *Why one way? : Defending an exclusive claim in an inclusive world* (69). Nashville: W Pub. Group.

Additional thoughts on the Will of God:

The will of God is not something you discover. It is something you discern and do in obedience to God's Word (what you read).

Discern:

Romans 12:1-2 (ESV)

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing **you may discern** what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

On what basis do we discern?

1. On the basis of what we read in the Bible:

1 Thessalonians 4:3 (ESV)

³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you **abstain from sexual immorality**;

1 Thessalonians 5:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ **give thanks in all circumstances**; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

1 Peter 2:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by **doing good** you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.

2. On the basis of what we observe as viable needs

2 Corinthians 8:3-5 (ESV)

³ For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints— ⁵ and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.

3. On the basis of the refinement we learn from suffering

1 Peter 4:1-2 (ESV)

¹ Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, ² so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.

Do:

Mark 3:35 (ESV)

³⁵ **For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."**

Ephesians 6:5-8 (ESV)

⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, ⁶ not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷ rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, ⁸ knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.

We should also say something about the call of God. This is a special and unique function of His Will.

Call:

Most frequent reference to the will of God:

1 Corinthians 1:1 (ESV)

¹ Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,

(see also 2 Cor 1.1; Eph 1.1; Col 1.1; 2 Tim 1.1)

God calls men to be pastors. It is an office filled not on the basis of academic qualifications, but on the basis of God's setting aside – as evidenced by character and giftedness.

Rewarded:

All those who do God's will are rewarded.

Hebrews 10:36-39 (ESV)

³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. ³⁷ For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; ³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him." ³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

1 John 2:17 (ESV)

¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.