

“How Important Is Integrity?”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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How important is integrity? It seems to me that with what is going on in our world, in our country, and in our nation’s capital, this question not only deserves our attention, it requires it. I believe that I put a high value on integrity. Yet as I asked myself this question and attempted to answer it, I found myself struggling to quantify the importance of integrity. Maybe some of you have similar difficulties with this question. In an attempt to address my difficulty in coming up with a specific answer, I decided to ask other questions. I started with a very basic question, one I thought I could answer. Does having integrity matter? This question seems to have only three possible answers, yes, no or it depends. For me the answer in the vast majority of situations is a definite yes. Feeling some confidence at answering that question I went on to consider a more challenging one. What difference does having integrity make? This question has an infinite number of answers—answers that are specific and particular to situations and to those involved in or affected by the situations. I don’t have the ability to consider all possible situations. My guess is that is true for all of us. We can, however, consider some possible situation. By considering some, we might begin to quantify how important integrity is.

Integrity, as I am sure we all know, has several meanings. As I began thinking about the difference integrity makes, I decided to consider one definition at a time. My reasoning was that taking one definition at a time might make answering the question easier. I started with the concept of integrity as a condition of being unbroken or whole.

Let’s consider how integrity matters using this understanding of the word. As I get older, I don’t have the same physical or mental integrity I had when I was younger. I am lucky to still have almost all of my body parts, except my tonsils, so my physical integrity is reasonably high. For this I am extremely grateful. But anyone whose physical integrity has been compromised significantly can identify specific differences that the loss of integrity has brought to their life. Things such as having a debilitating disease, broken bones, damaged joints, or even the loss of a limb have a significant impact on a person’s life. It is easy to recognize how a change in one’s physical integrity matters. We can also consider cognitive abilities using this definition of integrity. It is relatively easy to recognize how a deterioration of cognitive abilities, such as a loss of mental focus or memory, can have a profound impact, not only on the life of the person directly affected, but also on the lives of those who are close to that person.

Using this particular definition of integrity, it is relatively easy to determine what difference having integrity makes? But if we consider another definition of integrity, answering this same question becomes significantly more difficult. If we ask this question using the definition of integrity that involves “sound moral principle; uprightness, honesty, and sincerity,” the answers aren’t as clear or as simple as before.

An editorial that appeared in *Christianity Today* on December 19th provides a good example of just what I am getting at here. The editorial had the office of the President of the United States as its focus. Much of the article addressed issues specifically related to the person who holds that office currently. Because of both the focus and the content of the article, I initially had concerns about even mentioning it

here this morning. To address my concerns, I read both the UUFBS Statement on Political Speech and the IRS rules that apply to organizations that have 501c3 tax status, which includes this Fellowship. Both the Statement on Political Speech, and the IRS rules, state that no support for or opposition to a candidate for political office or a political party is allowed. So before I go any further I want to state clearly and emphatically that by referring to the recent article in *Christianity Today* I am not indicating support for or opposition to any candidate for political office or for any political party. My one and only purpose in citing this article is to address the topic of this sermon, which is integrity and how we determine the level of importance it has.

Now that I have been clear about my intention and purpose, I return to the editorial. It was written by Mark Galli, who is the editor in chief of *Christianity Today*. For those of you who aren't familiar with this magazine, it is an evangelical Christian periodical founded by the Reverend Billy Graham. In the article, Galli takes a very clear and definitive stand on the issue of the recent impeachment of the President. I won't indicate here specifically what that stand was since doing so might lead some to believe I am taking a political stand, which, as I stated a moment ago, I am not. The stand that Mr. Galli and, by extension, *Christianity Today* take is based almost entirely on the definition of integrity that we are currently considering. That stand is not shared by a sizable portion of those who read and financially support the magazine. Yet Galli and the magazine based their decision to publish this article on the level of importance they place on integrity.

As an example of the importance Galli and the magazine put on integrity I want to share two quotes from the article. First; "The President's failure to tell the truth—even when cornered—rips at the fabric of the nation." And second; "Unsavoury dealings and immoral acts by the President and those close to him have made this administration morally unable to lead." Note that each of these quotes address aspects of the definition of integrity that we are currently considering—specifically moral principle and honesty. What isn't apparent is that both of these quotes originally appeared in *Christianity Today* more than twenty years ago, in 1998. These quotes were in reference to the last President who was impeached, a President who was of a different political party than our current President. Let me state again, what I am saying here is not in support of or opposition to a candidate for office or the political party that person belongs to.

What I believe is important in these quotes, and in the article overall, is that integrity is about much more than a specific person in a particular political office or about a political party. What the article asserts is that integrity matters, and not just a little bit but a great deal. These quotes and this article speak directly to the issue of integrity, including its importance and the consequences that can result when the integrity of our political leaders is suspect or lacking. In the editorial Galli writes that when moral deficiencies become apparent it, and here I quote, "damages the institution of the presidency, damages the reputation of our country, and damages both the spirit and the future of our country."

This editorial has gotten a great deal of attention. And reactions to it have been very mixed. A subsequent article by the President and CEO of *Christianity Today* states that responses to this editorial "spanned the spectrum." Remember here what I stated earlier about attempting to answer the question; What difference does having integrity make? If we ask this question using the definition of integrity that involves "sound moral

principle; uprightness, honesty, and sincerity,” the answers aren’t as clear or as simple as before. What this editorial and the responses to it make clear is that when we consider how important integrity is, the answer quite frequently turns out to be, it depends. It depends on a number of variables—variables that include the definition of integrity we are using, the person being asked, and the particular situation that is being considered. There is a great deal that needs to be looked at, and thought about, as we explore the importance of integrity.

Now I return to the title of my sermon; How important is integrity? As I stated earlier, I put a high value on integrity. Because I believe integrity is very important. I wish others valued it to a similar degree. My wish, however, is only that, a wish. It is not how things are. Every one of us places our own particular value on integrity. And more than that, each and every one of us has a different understanding of what sound moral principle; uprightness, honesty, and sincerity mean. I have learned in the course of my life that while there may be times when I am able to influence how another person might think or feel, that influence is typically fleeting and minimal. In other words, when it comes to the beliefs, values or feelings of others, I have very limited control. The person I have the most control over is me. On this point I think I can make a generalization and say that is true for all of us. Even though we might want to have others think, feel or hold values in the way we would prefer, we don’t have that power.

With the little bit of time and influence I have this morning I hope that I have appropriately posed the question—How important is integrity? My hope is that each of you will take time to consider this question. As you consider it, I would suggest that you do as I have done and break it down into other questions that might be easier to answer. I would also suggest another approach as you seek answers that will guide your life. Try asking this question while looking in the mirror. By asking it while looking in the mirror you have the greatest likelihood of influencing the person each of us has the most control of, ourselves. I offer this suggestion because I believe that in these challenging times what we value, and how we live out our values, will have a significant impact on the path that lies ahead. That path will almost certainly hold difficulties. If history is any indication, that path will also hold promise.

It is with an eye toward promise that I share again the words of Nelson Mandela from our reading.

I have walked that long road to freedom.
I have tried not to falter;
I have made missteps along the way.
But I have discovered the secret...that after climbing a great hill,
one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.
I have taken a moment here to rest,
To steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me,
To look back on the distance I have come.
But I can rest only for a moment
For with freedom come responsibilities,
And I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.

So it is.