

The Foundational Virtue of Integrity: Without it, Nothing Else Works

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Brothers and Sister,

The Christ-like attribute I have selected to talk about today is *integrity*. For the purpose of this talk I will define integrity as being honest in our words and actions and most importantly, striving to keep our commitments. In my opinion, integrity is the foundational value of all the divine attributes. Without integrity, all of the other virtues just spin their wheel's in place and get nowhere. For example, what good is love if we don't have the integrity to keep the commitments that love prompts us to make? Or what good is faith if we don't have the integrity to follow up on the obligations that faith creates?

Integrity is one of the bed-rock values of a civilized and orderly society. Imagine a world where no one kept their commitments. Nothing could be relied upon. Nothing could be accomplished. Complete chaos would result. We see much of this in our society. On the other hand, there are some individuals that have developed the attribute of integrity to such an extent, that if they say they are going to do something, we can treat it as if it is already done. Karl G. Maeser, an early Utah educator, church member, and originator of the BYU honor code, is reported to have said:

“I have been asked what I mean by ‘word of honor.’ I will tell you. Place me behind prison walls—walls of stone ever so high, ever so thick, reaching ever so far into the ground—there is a possibility that in some way or another I may escape; but stand me on the floor and draw a chalk line around me and have me give my word of honor never to cross it. Can I get out of the circle? No. Never! I'd die first!”

If such an individual of integrity is a righteous one, there is no end to the good that the Lord can accomplish through that person. We have all been blessed to know individuals of this caliber.

What a gift to God and mankind are such individuals! Imagine the world if every person had that

kind of character. Most of the world's problems would disappear. I believe that these are they that will cause Satan's hands to be bound during the Millennium.

Christ was such a man. I have often wondered if one of the reasons that Christ's atonement had efficacy for those that lived before Christ, is due to the fact that he had already promised that he would redeem all mankind before the world was. He said "Here am I, send Me" and all creation shouted for Joy because they knew the integrity of the one who had answered the Father's call.

Our family has recently had the surprising and disappointing experience of learning how common it is for young single adults attending church owned schools to make commitments to their Bishops to keep the honor code required to attend, but apparently have no intention of keeping those commitments. It breaks my heart to hear such stories because of the damage they end up doing to themselves and to all those that surround them. They believe the lie that, 'their own actions impact no-one but themselves', so like a wrecking ball they leave a path of broken commitments, strained relationship, stress, heartache, and destruction in their wake. They are generally so self-absorbed that they are blind to the effects that their lack of integrity has upon everyone around them.

A few years ago, my wife came across a business article where an economist and former Harvard professor named Michael Jensen discusses the impact that individual employee integrity has on the success and productivity of a business. It is always fascinating to find corroborating conclusions about moral values outside of the realm of religion. In this paper he discusses the importance of those situations when we have made commitments that we can't keep. Of all of the things that I discuss today, I think this might be one of the most important, for it touches upon the topic of repentance. He says:

“We can honor our word in one of two ways: first by keeping our word, and on time; or second, as soon as we know that we won’t keep our word, we inform all parties counting on us to keep our word and clean up any mess that we’ve caused in their lives. When we do this, we are honoring our word despite not having kept it, and we have maintained our integrity. If you are serious about being a person of integrity, you will think very carefully before giving your word to anyone or anything, and you will never give your word to two or more things that are mutually inconsistent. As they should, many people focus on the importance of keeping their word; however, if one does not consider how to maintain integrity when one cannot or will not keep one’s word, this is sure to lead to out-of-integrity behavior at some point. If you’re up to anything important in life, you will not always be able to keep your word, and that’s alright, but if you are a person of integrity, you will always honor your word.”

Of all of those people that get hurt when we struggle with integrity, the one that we hurt the most is ourselves. Michael Jensen goes on to discuss the damage we do to ourselves when we don’t honor our word, especially those promises that we have made to ourselves:

“One’s word to one’s self is a critical part of integrity. By not being serious when we give our word to ourselves, we forfeit the opportunity to maintain our integrity by honoring our word to ourselves. For example, think of occasions when the issue of self-discipline comes up, and the ease with which we often dismiss it. It may be something trivial like, ‘I’m going to work out tomorrow at nine o’clock’, or something more serious like, ‘I will never cheat on my wife’. By failing to honor our word to ourselves, not only do we undermine ourselves as persons of integrity, but we diminish who we are as a person – we are less than whole and complete as a person. If we aren’t serious about this aspect of integrity, it will create ‘unworkability’ in our life: we will appear to others as inconsistent, unreliable and unpredictable. You simply cannot be a whole and complete person if you do not honor your word to yourself. Unfortunately, people almost universally justify or rationalize the mess in their lives resulting from their personal out-of-integrity behavior. They point to external causes of the mess in their lives and never acknowledge that the mess arises from their own personal out-of-integrity behavior.”

Of all the commitments we make, the most important are those that we make to God. God has instituted that the promises that we make to Him, those that we call “The Saving Ordinances”, are all done in such a manner that it would be hard to miss their seriousness. In a very significant way, with each saving ordinance we promise to take the name of God upon us as we covenant to keep His commandments, be His disciples, and build up His kingdom. He in turn promises that He will transform us through the power of His atonement and give us all that He has. If we are not striving to live with integrity, if we are regularly turning away from those commitments, if those commitments have not sunk deep down into our souls, then taking His name upon us has had no real effect on us, and in my opinion we are breaking one of the most serious of all the ten commandments: we have taken His name in vain, and by so doing are missing out on all the incredible growth that He so willingly and lovingly wants to provide for us.

I pray that we and all those that we love will learn to consistently live a life of integrity with those that surround us, with ourselves, and most importantly, with God. Finally, I testify of a loving Heavenly Father and Savior that patiently wait for those moments in our lives when we do.

And I do so in the Name of Jesus Christ, Amen.