



Acts 25:1-12
Living with Integrity

Summary: Christians are able to live with integrity in multiple spheres of life by following King Jesus.

One of the greatest compliments you can hear about someone who is powerful or famous is when someone who really knows them says: "She's same person all the time. Who you see in public is who I see at home."

It's a compliment of integrity, consistency, and authenticity.

Could the same thing be said about you? Are you the same person, all the time, in every setting? Do you have integrity, consistency, and authenticity? The answer is probably complicated, right? And it's complicated, in part, by our faith.

There is a very, very strong tendency for you, and me, to divide out our lives, to have your spiritual life and your 'normal' life. It might be on purpose, or it might be an accidental, but the truth is, and we've all experienced it, it's easy to separate God, Jesus, the Bible, Church, Prayer, from work, school, friends and 'daily life.'

This morning though, we're going to see that is possible to walk with absolute integrity before God and man - to be the same person, at all times, in all places, in fact, we're actually expected to do it. God wants us to be the same person everywhere. We might wear a lot of hats, but over them all is the umbrella of King Jesus. His authority has no boundaries and extends over every aspect of life, in every role we fill.

We discover all of this as we turn to Scripture and continue reading the history of the early church.

At this point, the Apostle Paul is being held in protective custody by the Roman Government, which is occupying Israel. Meanwhile, some of the Jewish religious and political leaders are upset with him, they see him as a rebel and want to put him to death. In fact, they tried to do that, and the Roman government, not knowing what was going on, stepped in and took Paul into custody.

Now there's something of a political and judicial stalemate that has been going on for years. The Jews want to put Paul to death, but they can't convince the Romans to do it because Paul's not only a Jew, he's also a Roman citizen and therefore he has certain rights. A new governor has just taken office though, and the Jews are hoping to leverage the new administration to get what they want. After all, the last governor was just recalled to Rome as a result of Jewish protests.

His name was Felix, and the new man is Festus which I'm sure to confuse at some point, but he takes office and immediately sets out on a tour of his new territory and constituency.

Acts 25:1 Now when Festus had come to the province, after three days he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem.

Caesarea is geographically north of Jerusalem, by about 60 miles, but it's topographically closer to sea level – Jerusalem is located on a mountain and so people always speak of going up to it.

It's the religious and cultural center of the region, so it's important for Festus to get up there, check the pulse of the situation, meet some people, and set his priorities. Part of the tour involves meeting with the local leadership and of course, they have their agenda ready to go:

2 Then the high priest and the chief men of the Jews informed him against Paul; and they petitioned him, **3** asking a favor against him, that he would summon him to Jerusalem—while *they* lay in ambush along the road to kill him.

So, they try to take advantage of Festus being new and just slide him this one little thing – 'you've got a guy over in Caesarea that we've had an issue with for a while and your predecessor wouldn't do anything about it – do you mind having him brought over and we can talk?' All the while knowing that they actually intended to kill him on the trip.

Now, I don't know how many of the Ten Commandments you have memorized, but this breaks at least two of them: you shall not lie and you shall not murder. You don't have to be too sophisticated in your theology to figure out these guys aren't the best spiritual role models. And yet, we're talking about the high priest and the chief men of the Jews.

There's clearly a lack of integrity here when you put on robes, go read the Scriptures and offer sacrifices in the temple, and then head off to a political meeting where you lie to the governor in order to set the conditions for an assassination. Where's the integrity there?

But stop and think for a minute: you and I have never something exactly like this, but we know what it's like, we understand because if we're honest we know that there have been times when we have worshipped God in the morning and then completely comprised in the afternoon. You've done things you know were wrong, but you explained it away to yourself, justified it to yourself, debated with your conscience and then did what you wanted to do.

So pay attention to the warning here – you can be super religious, super involved, have perfect attendance at Bible Study and still be an absolute wreck in your daily life. Those of you in the James study will spend some time talking about this problem and how it manifests with our speech when James points out that we use the same mouth to praise God and speak profanity and that such things ought not be.

God calls us to walk in integrity, to be the same person, all the time, under all conditions, because the authority of King Jesus knows no boundaries – He’s King when you’re reading your Bible and King on your commute; He’s king on Sunday morning and Tuesday morning too, His kingdom and authority have no boundaries, we’re always under Him.

But these morally-compromised leaders ask Festus to set things up, and he says no – you come on down with me.

Acts 25:4 But Festus answered that Paul should be kept at Caesarea, and that he himself was going *there* shortly. 5 “Therefore,” he said, “let those who have authority among you go down with *me* and accuse this man, to see if there is any fault in him.”

6 And when he had remained among them more than ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day, sitting on the judgment seat, he commanded Paul to be brought.

Festus spends a little over a week coming up to speed on the local situation and finally heads home, but the issue with Paul is bigger than he may have realized, and rises to the top of his transition agenda. As soon as he’s back at his palace, he launches an inquiry.

7 When he had come, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood about and laid many serious complaints against Paul, which they could not prove, 8 while he answered for himself, “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all.”

Now, this is super important, I want you to take note of it, underline it, highlight it, star it, however you want to mark things in your Bible, mark this passage because it has HUGE implications. With the Jews throwing all sorts of accusations at him, calling him all sorts of names, slandering him in ignorance as well as intentionally, here’s his defense: “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended in anything at all.”

Friends, that’s a massive claim! Paul has been seeking, diligently, to live for King Jesus at all times, in all places, no matter the cost, and now he is able to stand before the justice system and publicly declare, “I’m not guilty. I’ve honored the laws of God and the laws of government. I’m a man of integrity.”

Unfortunately, it seems he was the only one in the room able to make that claim, because look at how ‘justice’ plays out:

9 But Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor, answered Paul and said, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there be judged before me concerning these things?”

Now, remember the historical background, Felix was terminated because he couldn't keep the peace. Festus is out to build and maintain relationships. History tells us he did a great job – he oversaw a decrease in both criminal and political violence during his administration, but he died of illness after only two years in office. Right now he's seeking the best way out of this conflict.

He could be looking for a chance to make both parties happy, so he suggests, 'let's go back to Jerusalem, maybe bring in some witnesses who were there. But,' he says, 'the investigation and trial will still be "before me" and I'll make the final judgment – what do you say Paul?'

Paul knows his rights and he knows it's unlikely he'll get a fair trial in Jerusalem, so he plays his final card as a Roman citizen:

10 So Paul said, "I stand at Caesar's judgment seat, where I ought to be judged. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you very well know. 11 For if I am an offender, or have committed anything deserving of death, I do not object to dying; but if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar."

12 Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council, answered, "You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!"

Every Roman citizen had the right to request a trial in Rome before Caesar if the case involved capital punishment. This isn't making an appeal to a higher court asking them to overturn the decision, it's asking the higher court to be the only court that hears the trial.

The right to appeal was absolute for citizens and Festus was in no position to deny it. In fact, he probably breathed a little sigh of relief because it meant the issue was out of his hands now. The problem is, as we'll see next week, he doesn't really know what to say about why Caesar should be hearing the case or exactly what the charges are because he's made his decision based political factors more than legal facts.

So, what are we to make of all of this? Well, here's the point of this morning's sermon: both religion and government can be corrupted by selfish interests and compromise but Christians are able to live with integrity in multiple spheres of life by following King Jesus.

There has been a tremendous amount of violence and unholiness, unrighteousness, sin, and criminal activity undertaken in the name of religion. Think of the violence between Shia and Sunni in places like Iraq, think of the horrors committed by ISIS as they sought to establish a caliphate, a religious state. Think of the violence between Hindu radicals driving Muslims and Christians out of villages in India. Or of Buddhists in Burma driving Rohingya Muslims and Kachin Christians from their homelands and waging a war of genocide. Think of clashes between so called Catholics and Protestants in Ireland.

Never assume that all religious people are merciful and kind; never assume that they could all just coexist. Religion all by itself – fancy clothes, rituals, sacred texts, will not save you. It will not change you and make you new.

This is why Jesus came, and it's why knowing, loving, serving and following King Jesus is about a relationship we have with God, a personal, knowing, saving, real, relationship – it's not about special days on the calendar, incense, fasting, pilgrimage, and all the things we can do on the outside without changing our hearts – without becoming men and women of integrity.

Religion, without King Jesus, has problems.

But don't go thinking that means you should turn your back on the Church and trust in your fellow man. Human beings can do horrific things in the name of anti-religion. Let me give you just two examples.

First, the Chinese government, right now, is rounding up Uighur Muslims from western China, they are holding over a million people in 85 so-called re-education camps where children are separated from their parents and women are forcibly sterilized, prevented from ever having children as part of the central government's attempt to exert control over Northwest China where the Uighurs live.

Less than 100 years ago Joseph Stalin oversaw the execution of over 1 million Russians directly and several millions more indirectly through policies intended to cleanse certain groups from the state and turn family owned farms in Ukraine into centrally-owned collectives.

In both cases a God-less government, mistreated or murdered millions of people as part of an effort to exercise centralized conformity and control and it saw religion as a threat to the power of the state.

Here's the point: *religion, without Jesus* can produce suffering and conflict, and *government, without Jesus*, can produce suffering and conflict. Because in both cases human beings become addicted to power and control – we try to become the God we're meant to worship.

This is why Christians long for and pray for the day when the full authority of King Jesus will be revealed, when he will rule and reign over all the religious, political, and philosophical structures dreamt up and designed by humanity and the supreme ethic will be love – not squishy, soft, emotional, romantic love, but a sacrificial, brotherly, love that seeks the glory of God and the good of others instead of my own ease, preference, and comfort.

That's not an easy life to live under our current conditions on earth, but people like Paul show us it is possible, in many, probably in most, situations to walk with Jesus and maintain integrity in all the spheres of our lives – doing good, seeking the good of the others.

In fact, Scripture is full of such examples.

Go back to Genesis and think of Joseph who was given dreams by God and then sold into slavery by his brothers. But even in Egypt he thrived seeking to serve God and do good for others. Eventually he became a chief advisor to the Pharaoh and orchestrated a disaster-preparedness plan that saved the country and his people from starvation.

Which of you is going to do something similar for the United States or some other government? Which of you is going to be used by God to do something that will have a positive impact on hundreds of thousands or millions of people? And it won't happen at church, it will happen at work, while you serve under someone who doesn't know or worship your God, just like Pharaoh was ignorant of Yahweh.

Or think about Daniel – many of you just completed our study on the book that carries his name. He was taken, by force, from his homeland in Israel as a young man and transported thousands of miles across the desert by the Babylonians. While there he sought to walk in integrity – serving God without compromise, but also doing good for the nation. And again, this wasn't the nation of Israel, it was the nation that invaded Israel, but Daniel lived with righteousness and integrity, he pursued wisdom and sought justice and as a result the king thought about promoting him to the number two position in the whole administration.

Many of you know the story of Daniel in the lion's den. But do you remember why Daniel was thrown in there? It's because everyone else was jealous of his work performance and the only thing they could find to use against him was his religion. He walked in absolute integrity at work, so there was no fault there. And, he walked in integrity with God, there was no fault there, but it could be twisted against him.

And that's what they did, they made it illegal to pray to anyone but the king for 30 days. Which – quick side point – they didn't go for 90 days, or 6 months, or a year. They knew it wasn't going to take long, because this was Daniel's habit, this is who he was. So, they got the law passed, and then of course, they snatched him up and demanded justice which meant being thrown into the lions' den.

Those of you who know the story remember how it all played out – the king was bummed, he realized he'd been tricked and he was sad that he was going to lose such a good man. But Daniel told him not to worry.

The king couldn't sleep all night and the next morning he comes running in to see what's happened.

Dan 6:20 ... The king spoke, saying to Daniel, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?"
21 Then Daniel said to the king, "O king, live forever!"

Take note of this, write this down. Make a note in the margin of your Bible over in Acts 25.

22 My God sent His angel and shut the lions' mouths, so that they have not hurt me, **because** I was found innocent before Him; and also, O king, I have done no wrong before you."

Daniel, like Paul, was able to stand in the face of government and say, I am innocent before both God and you. My friends, this is my prayer for each of you – that you would be able to walk with God, to know and serve King Jesus without compromise and also excel at work and in all your various roles – that you might be able to say, I have done you no wrong, in fact, I have only sought your good – the good of this team, the good of this project, the good of the company, the good of this country. Christians, may we be known as people who do good, inside the church, in our homes, but also in the community and in public.

And to do it wherever you happen to be. Notice that both Joseph and Daniel were outside of Israel serving hostile governments. Don't expect perfect conditions.

If anything, work toward improving conditions right where you are – on the job, in your classroom, on your team, pray for your leaders and watch the impact it will have on you and everyone else. That was the message Paul sent to Timothy, a young man he was training for ministry. He wrote to him about how the church should pray and he said:

1 Timothy 2:1 Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, *and* giving of thanks be made for all men, 2 for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. 3 For this *is* good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

You can modify this for whatever organizational structure you happen to be in – kids, pray for your parents that you might have a quiet and peaceable life, pray for your teachers. Workers, pray for your boss, pray for your company. And obviously, citizens, pray for your government. I'd like to say pray twice as much as you complain, but could we just aim for a one to one ratio? Could we pray at least as much as we complain about politics?

Peter says something similar as he writes a letter to the church at large:

1 Peter 2:13 Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, 14 or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and *for the* praise of those who do good. 15 For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men— 16 as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. 17 Honor all *people*. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.

Friends, a pagan state is still a legitimate state, and we are, as much as possible, to honor God and the government at the same time, often honoring God by honoring the government.

And where we find flaws and failures, in our selves or our institutions, we should seek improvement – to make things better, which is, to make them more like God would have them to be.

So, how do we do all of this? How do we walk in integrity before God and the government? How do we seek the good of others, even pagans who might hate us? The answer is going to depend a lot on your immediate circumstances and your particular gifts, but it starts with awareness – knowing that it’s possible and that you’re called to it.

You’re on a mission from God.

Shortly before leaving the earth and ascending to Heaven, Jesus pulled His disciples together and gave them the Great Commission – many of you know this, but do you remember how it starts?

Matt 28:18 Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “**All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.** 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age.” Amen.

Our King holds all authority and has sent us to the ends of the earth.

He expects the church to go everywhere and anywhere – to leave no part of the planet untouched, to pass through all the governments of men, and do the greatest good of all – bringing people into a relationship with Him.

That will happen, in part, as they see and experience us doing good. As we are able to say, I have done no wrong against God or against the government. I seek the good of all people and the greatest good is to know, love, and serve King Jesus, no matter the location, no matter the cost.

My friends, if you have compromised, if you have fallen short of who God wants you to be, take a minute and recognize that, repent of that, God will forgive you when you ask Him.

So recognize, confess, and repent – turn from what you’ve been and then ask God to train you to be a man or woman of integrity, that you might be the same person on Tuesday as you are on Sunday, to be the same person at work as you are in Bible Study, to be the same person, at all times, in all places and live a single, integrated and innocent life before King Jesus – it’s possible, it’s preferable, it’s expected by our King and it will change the world for others.

Let’s pray