

Leadership Qualities: Integrity

Dr. Kenneth Boa

After surveying thousands of people around the world and performing more than 400 written case studies, James Kouzes and Barry Posner identified those characteristics most desired in a leader. In virtually every survey, honesty or integrity was identified more frequently than any other trait.¹

That makes sense, doesn't it? If people are going to follow someone, whether into battle or in business or ministry, they want assurance that their leader can be trusted. They want to know that he or she will keep promises and follow through with commitments.

The Integrity of Samuel

In light of this research, Israel's high regard for Samuel comes as no surprise. Samuel was a man who exuded integrity. Nowhere is this best illustrated than in 1 Samuel 12:1-4:

Samuel said to all Israel, "I have listened to everything you said to me and have set a king over you. Now you have a king as your leader. As for me, I am old and gray, and my sons are here with you. I have been your leader from my youth until this day. Here I stand. Testify against me in the presence of the Lord and his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes? If I have done any of these, I will make it right."

"You have not cheated or oppressed us," they replied. "You have not taken anything from anyone's hand."

During his farewell speech, after having led Israel for decades, Samuel promised to repay anything he had unjustly taken from anyone. What a promise! Even more impressive was the people's response. Not one person rose up to make a claim against Samuel.

Samuel's honesty and personal integrity permeated every area of his life. These two characteristics directed how he regarded his possessions, his business dealings and his treatment

of those who were weaker than himself. Samuel held himself accountable to the people he led. He opened himself up to the scrutiny of everyone with whom he had ever had dealings. As a result of this practice, Samuel's leadership has become legendary as this story has been told and retold throughout the centuries.

People want to know that their leader can be trusted. They want to know that leaders will keep promises and follow through on commitments. Promises and commitments are significant, though, in our day of Machiavellian ethics, it seems that they have become optional. We often seem more concerned with convenience and performance. We give lip-service to the importance of character, but we have the idea that when things get tough, the rules can be changed and commitments and covenants may be discarded at will.

But the Bible makes clear just how important our covenants are. Throughout the Scriptures, God focuses on the fact that he is a God who makes and keeps his covenants, that he can be trusted (1 Chronicles 16:15; Psalm 105:8). God can be trusted because he is trustworthy. That's the point: it always comes down to the issue of character, not just words. Biblical integrity is not just doing the right thing; it's a matter of having the right heart and allowing the person you are on the inside to match the person you are on the outside. This is how God is. This is how his people should be.

Perhaps a good word to think of is "consistency." There must be consistency between what is inside and what is outside. God is totally consistent. His actions and behaviors always match his character and nature. And his goal for us is nothing less. Christ's objective for his disciples is to make us disciplined people. In the words of John Ortberg, "Disciplined people can do the right thing at the right time in the right way for the right reason." Just like God.

The God Who Never Changes

Is there anyone we can trust? People let us down again and again, because there is often a discrepancy between what they claim to believe and how they actually live. But God will never let us down, because he never changes. His promises are as good as his unchanging character: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

Jesus does not change. The Living God does not change. His love, his truth and his goodness are not governed by external circumstances or conditions – they never vacillate. Therefore, God’s character and the promises he makes are supremely worthy of our trust and commitment. He does what he says, and his covenant love is always dependable.

This is fundamental. What can I lean against? What can I trust in? What can I pursue with reckless abandon? So many of us have been burned by relationships, by people going back on their word, claiming that they said something when they did not say it. It can make you cynical if you’re not careful. But when we come back to the character of God, we realize, “He is the unchanging standard.”

Because it is impossible for God to lie (Hebrews 6:18; Titus 1:2), he is the ultimately reliable source of hope. His changeless character is the foundation of all of his promises. Whatever he says he will do is as good as done, and when we hope in his promises, this hope becomes an anchor for the soul, both firm and secure (Hebrews 6:19). Unlike many parents, God’s yes is always yes, and his no is always no (James 5:12). When God says yes, it stays yes; when he says no, it stays no. This has both negative and positive ramifications. Negatively, there is no getting God to change his mind through bribery or whining. Positively, when God makes a promise, he can be counted on to fulfill that word.

The sting remains of broken promises from parents – ballgames missed, trips never taken. The writer of Proverbs accurately diagnoses much of our present malaise when he says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick” (Proverbs 13:12a). Much of the heartache we experience is directly related to the unreliability of people.

But God’s actions flow perfectly out of his character: “He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind” (1 Samuel 15:29). There is no possibility of manipulating or bribing or bargaining with God, because he will never compromise his perfect integrity. God himself has testified, “I the Lord do not change” (Malachi 3:6). God’s perfect and constant character allows us to trust in his promises and timing.

God *is* integrity. He does not merely act with integrity; integrity is his character. But what about us? The biblical virtue of integrity points to a consistency between what is inside and what is outside, between belief and behavior, our words and our ways, our attitudes and our actions, our values and our practice.

The Dis-integration of Isaiah

When the prophet Isaiah had a vision of the glorious and awesome Creator of the universe, he was overwhelmed by the holiness of God.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two the covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, “See this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

Isaiah 6:1-7

R.C. Sproul comments on Isaiah’s encounter with the holiness of God:

To be undone means to come apart at the seams, to be unraveled. What Isaiah was expressing is what modern psychologists describe as the experience of personal disintegration. To disintegrate means exactly what the word suggests, “dis integrate.” To integrate something is to put pieces together in a unified whole.... The word integrity...[suggests] a person whose life is whole or wholesome. In modern slang we say, “He’s got it all together.”²

Isaiah says, “I’m undone. I’m torn apart,” which is just the opposite of integrity. To have integrity is to be integrated, to be whole, to have it all together in a sense, to be consistent. Isaiah finds himself torn apart, and this forces him to realize his own deficiency. When faced with the awesome holiness of God, Isaiah becomes aware of his own uncleanness. Throughout the Bible, man’s encounters with God are very consistent in this way.

For example, when Peter realizes the power of Jesus he falls to his knees and says, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” (Luke 5:8) Peter knows that what has just happened is not natural; it is, in fact, supernatural. This is not the way things work, but instead of saying, “How did he do that?” he says, “Depart from me, I’m a sinful man.” Peter is not only aware of Jesus’ power, but of holiness and his own sinfulness. An encounter with holiness is traumatic. The holiness of God becomes a standard to which we can never measure up, and this is traumatic for people who so desperately want to fool themselves into thinking they are self-sufficient.

In John 18, a cohort of 600 armed soldiers comes to arrest Jesus and have their own traumatic encounter with holiness:

Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, “Who is it you want?”

“Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied.

“I am he,” Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, “I am he,” they drew back and fell to the ground.

John 18:4-6

Six hundred soldiers fall to the ground, and the word that is used implies that they were sort of held there, pinned to the ground. There are many speculations as to what exactly happened, but it appears as if the veil of his flesh lifted, and that pre-incarnate glory that he had before the foundation of the world was opened up for a microsecond. It was sufficient to overwhelm them.

R. Kent Hughes, in his commentary *Behold the Man* suggests:

Jesus’ answer was one of his last uses of the power by which he calmed the seas, stilled the winds, and healed the sick. The cohort didn’t arrest Jesus – he arrested them. His words were a gracious warning that they were in over their heads.³

They must have known something wasn’t quite right. Six hundred armed men are now more afraid than the one they came looking for.

Throughout the Bible, men discover just how traumatic an encounter with holiness is. The transfiguration scared Peter so much he didn’t know what to say (Mark 9:6). John, on the isle of Patmos, sees Jesus and is so overwhelmed he “fell at his feet as though dead” (Revelation 1:17). This is the same John who had leaned on Jesus in the upper room (John 13:25). John would often sit next to Jesus. There was an intimate bond between them. But when he saw that holiness, he was overwhelmed. The conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:4), Moses’ reaction to the burning bush (Exodus 3:6), Joshua’s interaction with the commander of the army of the Lord (Joshua 5:14), Jacob’s response after his dream at Bethel (Genesis 28:17), Gideon realizing he’s been interacting with the angel of the Lord (Judges 6:22). The list goes on

and on of people who are absolutely terrified and overwhelmed by the awe-inspiring holiness of God.

God's holiness is truly awesome, and our natural reaction to him is one of fear. But there is another side of his nature, his closeness to us, that somehow allows us to have this relationship with him. Jesus, the mediator between God and man, makes it possible for us to avoid being consumed by his awesome holiness, and instead to be declared righteous. That is amazing. The Living God is willing to say that you are righteous. How is that possible? It's because Christ himself is in us.

When we live our entire lives before the face of God (*corem deo*) and practice a constant abiding in his presence, we realize that being people who do not manifest integrity is inconsistent with the dignity and destiny we've been called to. We have been called to live on a higher plane than that, to "live a life worthy of the calling [we] have received" (Ephesians 4:1), because, now, Christ is in us. He wants to live his life through us (Galatians 2:20); we are not only his representatives (2 Corinthians 5:20), as members of his church we are, in some mysterious way, his body (Ephesians 1:23; Colossians 1:24).

Now, that's impossible unless he dwells in us, but therein lies the solution. In fact, this is the genius of the Christian life. Christianity is not a religion; it's a relationship. Christianity is not about rules and regulations. Instead, it is the presence and power of a person who indwells us and promises to never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).

As fallen men and women, we realize how disintegrated we are when we come face to face with God's perfect integration. And, like Isaiah, it forces us to recognize our deep need for personal reconstruction. Isaiah realized the depth of his own sin in the process of catching a glimpse of God's perfect holiness, and he acknowledged those areas in which he had turned from

his commitments as a priest and a prophet. But his commitment and his life as a faithful prophet demonstrate for us the possibility of framing a life of integrity with God's help.

The Hypocrisy of the Pharisees

If we fail to face up to our inadequacy, we fall into the trap of the Pharisees: hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is the opposite of integrity, and this is precisely what Jesus accuses the Pharisees and teachers of the law of in Matthew 23. Six times in this sermon, he uses the stinging word "hypocrites" (vv. 13, 15, 23, 24, 27, 29). Originally, a hypocrite meant an actor who put on a mask to assume a false identity while he played for the audience. This accusation would be particularly offensive to the Pharisees who hated all forms of Hellenization, including the Greek theatre. In essence, Jesus was calling them the very thing they hated.

Anyone who has ever labored under the false notion that Jesus was some kind of quiet, nice man will have trouble with these verses:

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are....

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness....

"You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?"

Matthew 23:15, 27-28, 33

This is not, to use Philip Yancey's expression, "Mr. Rogers with a beard!" Jesus' language reveals the depth of his righteous anger. Notice that each verse that includes the word hypocrite begins with the words: "Woe to you." This word "woe" (*ouai*) can contain pathos, anger, warning and derision; and may include all of these at the same time. In this passage, Jesus lambasted the Pharisees for saying one thing and doing another. Their lack of integrity was not

only substandard for those who would follow Christ, as religious leaders they were guilty of misrepresenting God the Father.

We have already discovered that integrity – the direct opposite quality of hypocrisy – is the quality that people want most in a leader. Clearly, the Pharisees and teachers of the law in Jesus’ day failed to live up to that standard. When we talk about integrity today, we generally use other, closely related terms such as *ethics* and *morality*. But a clear understanding of the concept of integrity requires clear thinking about all three words. Each has a distinct meaning. When properly used, they bring clarity to a crucial but often misunderstood leadership essential:

- *Ethics* refers to a standard of right and wrong, good and evil. It’s what the Pharisees *said* they believed was right.
- *Morality* is a lived standard of right and wrong, good and evil. It’s what the Pharisees actually did.
- *Integrity* means “sound, complete, integrated.” To the extent that a person’s ethics and morality are integrated, that person has integrity. To the extent that a person’s ethics and morality are not integrated, that person lacks integrity.

Let’s look at this another way. If your friend John tells you he will lie, cheat and steal, he has a low ethic. If he does business that way, he also has a low morality. John is unethical and immoral, but he has integrity – twisted as it may be – because the morality is consistent with the ethic. If John claims to cheat and steal but doesn’t cheat and steal, he is moral in practice but lacks integrity, because his morality doesn’t match his ethic.

You can have a high or low ethic. You can be moral or immoral. The choice is yours. But if you want to have integrity, you must choose your ethic and live to match it. Anyone who

wants to lead at least owes it to prospective followers to let them know what they are getting into.

The Bible teaches a high and holy ethic. A person who claims to be a Christian and to live by biblical standards makes an ethical statement. He or she has committed to a certain morality. For that person to have integrity, then, he or she must live by the biblical ethic. Jesus makes it unequivocally clear that the worst choice is the hypocritical one. This is serious business. When we find our walk not matching our talk, the probing question of Jesus should echo in our hearts: “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46). If we imagine the holy eyes of Jesus Christ, Lord of the universe, as he asks this question, we ought to be at least a little frightened.

The Process of Integration

It’s self-evident that a hypocrite is unqualified to guide others toward attaining higher character. No one respects a person who talks a good game but fails to play by the rules. What a leader does will have a greater impact on those he or she wishes to lead than what a leader says. A person may forget 90 percent of what a leader says, but he or she will never forget how the leader lives. This is why Paul tells Timothy:

Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

1 Timothy 4:15-16

In this life, we never attain perfection. But there should be progress toward the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. We will never attain it this side of eternity, but there should be visible progress, evident to others. Notice the two things Paul exhorts Timothy to watch: your life and your doctrine. In other words, give careful attention to your behavior and your belief. Make

sure they match. Constantly examine yourself to see whether or not your walk matches your talk.

Bill Hendricks encountered an illustration of this principle in the go-go days of the real estate market of the 1980s. He met a developer who claimed to have woven what he called “biblical principles of business” into his deals. But when the market went south, he skipped town and left his investors to pick up the pieces – and the debts.

Another of Bill’s friends stands in sharp contrast to the first. He too was a land developer. He too talked of integrating biblical principles into his business. And when the market crashed, so did his empire. But unlike the man who ran away, this land developer, as a matter of conscience, worked out a plan to pay back his investors.⁴

Money tends to bring out what’s really inside, doesn’t it? When it comes to financial matters, you really discover what a man is made of. Which of those two men would you rather follow? Which one demonstrated integrity? David writes about the man “who keeps his oath even when it hurts” (Psalm 15:4b). He is the man who “will never be shaken” (v. 5b). There is simply no substitute for a man or woman of consistent Christ-like character.

That doesn’t imply that any of us will be perfect. In fact, the New Testament doesn’t call for perfect leaders; it calls for those who are *models of progress in their faith*. We will all stumble in many ways, but our desire is to see progress toward the integration of our claims and our practice.

Secrecy and Small Things

The best way to discern whether or not we are making progress is to ask ourselves, “How do I live when no one’s looking?” It’s easy to look like a person of integrity when people are watching, but do I live my private life with the same level of consistency as I live my public life?

So much of our lives are consumed with what might be called “image maintenance.” We spend vast amounts of energy trying to get people to think about us the way we want to be thought about. John Ortberg suggests, “Human conversation is largely an endless attempt to convince others that we are more assertive or clever or gentle or successful than they might think if we did not carefully educate them.”⁵ Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:1 are hard to get around: “Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

It’s possible to live one life publicly and another life privately. That’s not integrity; it’s an invitation for God’s discipline. We are to live with consistency in public and in private, because our Father “sees what is done in secret” (Matthew 6:4). Since this is the case, being faithful in small, secret things is a big deal. It may be the case that God is far less concerned with your public persona than he is in your private character. He may be more concerned with how you manage your personal checking account than how well you administer the books on a big business deal. It’s in the small, secret places of self-evaluation that God’s grace changes you and shapes you into the image of his Son.

In the end, we become what our desires make us. Who we become reveals what we really desire. If you desire the praise of men, then you will become a certain kind of person. But if you desire the praise of God, then integrity will need to become a priority. As you sense the overwhelming holiness of our Creator, you will understand how unraveled you are. But as you focus on the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, you will recognize that even though you may feel undone, you are not undone because he has made you whole. His grace is sufficient, for his power is made perfect in your weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

¹ Kouzes, James M., and Posner, Barry Z. *Credibility: How leaders gain and lose it, why people demand it* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 14.

² Sproul, R.C. *One Holy Passion* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987).

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Behold the Man* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books), 129-130.

⁴ Adapted from Howard Hendricks and William Hendricks, *As Iron Sharpens Iron* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 67-69.

⁵ John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 164.