

FROM THE SERVANT GENERAL

ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP

(Part 3)

INTEGRITY

One of the most important aspects of servant leadership is integrity. What is integrity? It is a word often used, but superficially understood, and not so much appreciated in its depth of meaning.

The dictionary defines it as “uprightness of character.” Another definition is “firm adherence to a code especially moral or artistic values. Synonyms given are probity, incorruptibility and honesty.

I would offer my own definition. Integrity is living the truth in word, thought and deed.

For us to better appreciate the meaning of integrity, let me give some instances that point to a lack of it. Here I do not speak of what is obvious—such as dishonesty, corruption or moral failures. Rather, these are instances that are committed even by supposedly renewed and God-loving Christians, who are serving Him and the Church.

A Lack of Integrity

Speaking half-truths

Lying is a sin. In fact, since Satan is “the father of lies” (Jn 8:44), one who is a liar exchanges his sonship under the Father for that of Satan. But what is more diabolical is deliberately speaking half-truths. This, in a way, is worse than an outright lie, because it manipulates the truth, twisting it to one’s own ends. Because it is based on a truth, and on the surface might seem like the truth, it becomes more deceptive, and can lead many people astray.

Let me give an example. There was a person who had attacked and betrayed me who suddenly found himself sitting in a plane right beside me. Throughout the 4-hour flight, he slept (or pretended to be asleep), not eating nor taking a comfort break. When the plane landed, he bolted out of his seat and closeted himself in the toilet, until all had disembarked from the plane. It was obvious that he did not want to speak to me, or felt ashamed to do so. Later, he made two claims that were half-truths. One, he said I was seated beside him for 4 hours but did not speak to him! Two, to another audience, he said it was evidence of our friendship and continuing acquaintance that we were even seated together in the plane.

On both occasions, he told the truth, that we were seated together and that I did not speak to him (not wanting to bother him if he was truly tired, I was waiting for him to

wake so we could talk). But on both occasions, he was lying, giving a false impression, deliberately twisting the reality, misleading his listeners.

Truth is of God, as Jesus himself is the truth (Jn 14:6a). On the other hand, lies are of the devil, who “is a liar” (Jn 8:44). To lie is already a grave sin. To manipulate or use the truth in order to lie is even graver.

Saying yes but doing no

Have you ever said yes to something but then did not follow through and did not do what had been agreed on? Now I am not talking about circumstances changing from the time you said yes to the time when you were about to act on it. In such a case, we simply go back to the person we had an agreement with, and work it out.

What makes it a failure in integrity?

If you were just saying yes, but in your heart and mind you had no intention of doing what was agreed on.

If you were just saying yes in order to get the discussion over with, to set aside all opposition, or to put closure to a contentious situation.

If you were just saying yes in order to lull the opposition to a false sense of acceptance, but with the intent to ultimately get your own way.

If you might have had the intention to act, but later decided to renege, because this was to your personal advantage.

If you ignore or maneuver your way out of what was agreed.

If you put your own interpretation on what was agreed and carry on accordingly, knowing that it is different from the mind of the one with whom you agreed.

Saying yes but not following through is worse than just saying no. With the latter, at least the other party knows how you stand. With the former, the other party is deluded into thinking all is well when all is not. And of course, it adversely affects how things move forward, as seemingly agreed on by the parties.

Jesus told the parable of the two sons (Mt 21:28-31a). The first said no but then changed his mind and did what his father asked him. The second said yes but did not go. The first did the father’s will but the second did not. Now consider this: if the first son had not changed his mind, then he too would not have done his father’s will. But the posture of the second son would still have been worse, since he said yes but reneged, since he in effect deceived his father, since by his yes his father was not able to decide on an alternative so the work would be done. The second son failed in integrity.

Being plastic

This is about being double-faced or hiding behind a mask. It is saying one thing and meaning another. It is putting up false appearances. It is living a lie.

Some examples of this are:

Acting piously while deliberately living sinfully. This is not to speak about the sins that we all commit from time to time, even as we might not want to.
Extolling people while thinking ill of them or cursing them under your breath. This does not refer to the courtesy and respect that we ought to accord to people, because of their inherent dignity as children of God, even if we do not get along with them. We should still be nice to people we have problems with.
Encouraging people to Christian generosity while living selfishly.
Embracing and patting people on the back while planting a knife on their backs.

Another word for being plastic is hypocrisy. It is not only pretending to be what one is not, but it is worse than that. It is outright deception.

Jesus severely condemned the Pharisees and scribes for their hypocrisy (Lk 11:39ff). This was especially so because they were teachers of the law and ought to have known better. Where much is given, much is expected. Thus servant leaders are called to the highest order of integrity.

The opposite of being plastic is being authentic. So say what you mean, and mean what you say. Live in the light and truth of God's ways.

Own agenda, not the Lord's

We are the Lord's servants. We serve His agenda. One who looks to a personal or hidden agenda is one who lacks integrity.

In what ways does one serve his own agenda?

Seeking power or position, or looking to prestige or pay, in doing Christian service.
Wanting to be recognized or rewarded for one's service, and feeling resentful when this does not happen.
Making decisions not for the good of the body but to consolidate one's position or to build turf.
Stealing money from God. This includes outright theft as well as improper handling of tithes and donations for Christian mission.
Spending community funds lavishly for one's own comfort for mission (travel, accommodation, mission transport, food, etc.).
Maligning others in order to promote one's cause. This is especially grave when there is no truth to what is being said.
Having a political agenda in helping the poor.

Jesus has already instructed us how we are to serve Him. First we follow Him by denying ourselves and taking up our cross daily (Lk 9:23). Then, when we go on mission, we are to be "lean and mean," taking nothing unnecessary and relying on the generosity

of those we serve (Mt 10:9-11), being detached and completely reliant on God (Lk 9:3). This is God's agenda, even for those wonderful souls who respond to His call to service. This is how God wants mission and Christian work to be done. We cannot insist on our own way of doing things. And worse, doing things our own way while proclaiming that we allegedly are doing it for God.

Judas had his own agenda in following Jesus. Though he might have genuinely been looking for the messiah, he was also a thief, helping himself to the money contributed for Jesus' mission (Jn 12:6). He compounded this sin by feigning righteousness and love for the poor, complaining about the waste of costly perfumed oil used to anoint the feet of Jesus (Jn 12:3-5).

Judas betrayed Jesus, accepting money from the chief priests (Lk 22:3-6). When Jesus spoke about his coming betrayal, Judas even feigned innocence (Mt 26:21-25). This again compounded his failure in integrity.

Be forewarned. When we fail in integrity, sin will pile upon sin. We will get deeper into the hole. When we have our own agenda, but hidden within the context of our serving the Lord, we will continually be lying, dishing half-truths, covering up, giving disinformation. We will find ourselves in a spiral of deceit and deception that inevitably leads to death.

Living in Integrity

To live in integrity is to avoid the actions that rob us of our integrity, such as stated above. However, integrity is not just about avoidance, but is about compliance. It is complying with the way of God for us.

Integrity relates to the word integral, which denotes a situation of being unimpaired, or wholeness, of soundness, of being undivided. This is how God would have us.

Unimpaired by sin.

Structurally sound according to God's design.

Undivided in love for and loyalty to God.

In the end, integrity is all about morality, living according to the truth of God and His ways. In the end, integrity is all about righteousness and holiness. Such is the way of God; such is the way to God.

It is being preserved in honesty and virtue (Ps 25:21a).

It is walking without blame (Ps 26:1a).

It is the way by which we can look to God's support and being allowed in His presence forever (Ps 41:13).

It is the only way we can continue to serve God (Ps 101:6b).

It is the way by which we can assure happiness for our children (Prv 20:7).

Integrity has to do with our relationship with God, and therefore, also with our relationship with each other, especially within the context of community. Living the truth of God's ways and His call to us as community, integrity is essential for the proper functioning of the body.

It is what truly makes us brethren, open and loyal to one another.

It is what enables one to be a true and valuable team player, one in our common vision and mission.

It is what makes one trustworthy, to whom others can entrust their very lives.

It is what enables us to be unique individuals with unique gifts, but who can be formed into one body that God can truly use for His purposes.

It is what supports and strengthens one's faithfulness to covenant and the way of life God has given us.

Eliphaz the Temanite said to Job: "Is not your piety a source of confidence, and your integrity of life your hope?" (Jb 4:6). The same is asked of us.

Let us realize that integrity of the highest order is the call to all Christians, but especially to servant leaders.

Let us affirm our commitment to the kind of life God desires for us, so we can look forward with hope, trusting only in Jesus.

"I follow the way of integrity;
I act with integrity of heart"
(Ps 101:2a,2c)

God bless you all.

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