

James the Just: Increase in Integrity

Integrity is one of the most highly desired characteristics in a relationship. Integrity is having sound moral character, honesty.

When we do marriage prep sessions, we ask the couple what characteristics are most important to them, almost without fail they will both say honesty. When asked what negative characteristics would be most hurtful, they both often say dishonesty. What they are saying is they desire is a spouse who has integrity.

When companies are looking for leaders, they look for people who have integrity. Words like honest, trustworthy, dependable, loyal are used to describe people of integrity.

What do you desire of the leaders in your life (boss, mentor, accountability partner, spouse, church leader, teacher, parent)? Probably integrity, having sound moral character and honesty.

Integrity is something that can be learned. It's something that you can grow in. Now if you have a history of being dishonest, untrustworthy, unreliable, or disloyal, it's going to take some time, but you can change the course of your life by the power of Christ in you!

So you can grow in integrity, but you also can lose your integrity. It all starts with the words that come from your mouth. In the book of James, we have already looked at some things that James brings attention to concerning the words we speak.

In James 1:26, James says, "If anyone thinks he is religious without controlling his tongue, then his religion is useless and he deceives himself."

Then James devotes much of chapter 3 to a discussion of the power and the evils of the tongue. Now in chapter 5 James covers one more issue with your speech before concluding his letter with one of the greatest uses of speech, which is prayer.

James continues to reveal that a person's speech provides the most revealing glimpse of their spiritual condition....the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart.

James 5:12 (HCSB)

12 Now above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. Your "yes" must be "yes," and your "no" must be "no," so that you won't fall under judgment.

"Now above all, my brothers" - this is of higher significance than the previous teaching on your speech. Not that they are unimportant, but you really need to get this one.

“Do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath.”

During this time, the people were abusing what the Old Testament taught about upholding truth and keeping oaths and vows.

The Old Testament required that oaths be limited to only very serious occasions, people were advocating that oaths be used for almost anything. The result was foolish, meaningless oath-taking that completely violated basic honesty.

Leviticus 19:12 (HCSB)

12 You must not swear falsely by My name, profaning the name of your God; I am Yahweh.

How many times do you hear people swear on someone’s grave, or with “God as their witness”, or they are always leading or following a statement with “I swear it’s true” or “I promise”. This is the same thing they were doing back in this day.

I recently met an awesome young man, very smart, loves the Word, loves Jesus, but in conversation he kept saying “I’m telling you the truth”. So I asked him why he kept saying that, were all the other things lies? He basically told me yes! It was an issue he had and he’s working on it.

This is what the people were doing in James’ day and many still do today. When your reputation gets to the point where you have to swear or make an oath for everything you say, you don’t have any integrity.

It’s a dangerous place to be.....especially when invoking the name of the Lord.

Deuteronomy 23:23 (HCSB)

23 Be careful to do whatever comes from your lips, because you have freely vowed what you promised to the Lord your God.

See, originally, swearing was an attempt to involve the character and authority of God to support a claim or a promise. It was for very serious matters, used on rare occasions. When a person would make an oath, they were required by law to fulfill them...especially if invoking the name of God.

James’ point is that instead of oaths and vows being a mark of one’s integrity, they had become a mark of deceit. Instead of prompting confidence, they were prompting skepticism. And so these people, with all their oaths and vows, were quickly becoming nothing more than a society of liars. Swearing evasively became justification for lying. Lying under oath became a fine art.

“Your “yes” must be “yes,” and your “no” must be “no,” so that you won’t fall under judgment.” James was referring to a teaching of Jesus:

Matthew 5:33-37 (HCSB)

33 “Again, you have heard that it was said to our ancestors, You must not break your oath, but you must keep your oaths to the Lord. 34 But I tell you, don’t take an oath at all: either by heaven, because it is God’s throne; 35 or by the earth, because it is His footstool; or by Jerusalem, because it is the city of the great King. 36 Neither should you swear by your head, because you cannot make a single hair white or black. 37 But let your word ‘yes’ be ‘yes,’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no.’ Anything more than this is from the evil one.

It is better to not swear at all! Your character should be of such integrity that your words can be believed without an oath! Your speech should be as if it were under oath all the time!

“Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes,’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no.’ Anything more than this is from the evil one.

Wow, that is a sobering thought....in John 8 Jesus says that lying is satan’s native language and He refers to satan as the father of lies....

If in Christ, you are to represent Him. You are to look like Him. Consider who you look like when you lie. Consider who is influencing you when you lie. Consider whose language you are speaking when you lie.

Again, integrity is much more than just telling the truth, it’s being a person with sound moral character and honesty. It is certainly something you can grow in!

Honesty and integrity are absolutely essential for success in life - all areas of life. The really good news is that anyone can develop both honesty and integrity. ~ Zig Ziglar

So, how can we increase in our integrity?

1. Consider—don’t make promises you can’t keep. We need to carefully, prayerfully consider the things we make a commitment to do. There are all kinds of things we WANT to do. There are all kinds of things we COULD do. There are all kinds of things we SHOULD do. But, what are the things we CAN do? More importantly, what are the things that GOD WANTS US TO DO?

We have to evaluate our lives and make sure that we are not only doing good things, but that we’re doing the best things we can, for Christ, for our families, and for our integrity. Then, after you have carefully, prayerfully considered these things, let your “Yes” be yes and your “No” be no.

2. Commit—to keeping the promises you make—even when it costs you!

Psalm 15:4b, says this about the person who can freely enter into God’s presence. A person who is pleasing to God is one “...who keeps his oath even when it hurts.”

David Jeremiah gives us this definition of integrity: “Integrity is keeping my commitment(s) even if the circumstances when I made the commitment(s) have changed.”

Once you consider and say “Yes” you need to commit—even when it costs you! But, when you have made a promise and failed to keep it, in order to increase in your integrity, you need to:

3. Confess—to admit when you’ve failed. We all have broken a promise at one time or another. When we fail and drop the ball, it is absolutely essential that we are honest about it. Instead of making excuses, we have to admit we were wrong. We have to admit that we have caused disappointment and we need to ask for understanding and forgiveness. But it doesn’t end there—after admitting our failure, have to resolve to change, to improve, to regain our integrity. We need to show that we are committed to a pattern of keeping our promises, even though we sometimes fail.

4. Surrender to Christ. We need to not only commit to growing in integrity; we also need to be enabled to grow in integrity—through our relationship and surrender to Christ. In John 15:4, Jesus told his disciples “...Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.” We can’t grow. We can’t change. We can’t radically improve if we don’t abide in Christ. We cannot be Christ-like if we are not also Christ-filled. Christ is our ultimate source for growing in integrity, both by His example and His power.

Proverbs 2:20-21 (HCSB)

20 So follow the way of good people,
and keep to the paths of the righteous.

21 For the upright will inhabit the land,
and those of integrity will remain in it;

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.

Integrity means that you are the same in public as you are in private. Joyce Meyer

You can’t get into heaven based on your integrity, just like you can’t get into heaven based on your goodness or righteousness or works.

Psalms 41:11-13 (HCSB)

11 By this I know that You delight in me:
my enemy does not shout in triumph over me.

12 You supported me because of my integrity
and set me in Your presence forever.

13 May Yahweh, the God of Israel, be praised
from everlasting to everlasting.

Amen and amen.