

Doing the Right Thing in Life!

We're in a message series on how, with God, it's "Never Too Late in Life." This morning I want to talk about doing the right thing. Kouzes and Posner who write about leadership and best business practices did a survey across the US. They asked workers, "What's the trait you most admire in a supervisor?" They identified 225 traits in fifteen categories, but the number one thing people looked for in a leader was integrity. They also mentioned things like, "trustworthy," "truthful," "has character," "lives by their convictions."

The word "integrity" is a word we've talked about before. It means living an integrated life, a life that's whole, consistent, without partitions or fragmentation. William Barclay said, "Life cannot be divided into compartments, some of which God is involved, others in which God is not involved. There cannot be one kind of language in the church and another kind of language in the factory or office. There cannot be one kind of conduct in the church and another in the world."

The core of our beliefs is the truth that Jesus is Lord, ruler over every single area of our lives. Christ's authority over my life, is integrated into my relationships, finances, thought life; nothing is exempt.

If we're going to live integrated, a life of integrity, it has to start inside us. Integrity is first and foremost an inside job. We have to pay attention to the development of our character and have a moral compass for navigating life's decisions.

Having character means being clear about what's right and then having the will to do what's right in the right way no matter what it costs. Character tells you what you stand for and what you won't stand for. It informs you and everyone around you what you value. It means being the same person whether everybody's looking or nobody's watching.

Good looks, expertise, skill, knowledge, a network of relationships may open doors for you. But your character will determine how you handle those opportunities. Character is something that is forged over the course of a lifetime - you don't cram for it like a final exam - and often the deepest parts of it are forged in times of difficulty.

The good news is it's never too late to start paying attention to living a life of integrity.

We heard the story in Daniel 3, of an out of control king with a big ego. Nebuchadnezzar is the king of Babylon - do you know what Babylon is called today? It's Iraq. At that time they controlled Syria, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, parts of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and Iran. One day he comes up with this great idea to build a ninety-foot statue of himself. Then everyone would have to bow down and worship the statue as a sign of loyalty. Anyone who refused would be immediately executed.

When the statue was finished and the day of dedication and celebration came, the image was unveiled and everyone as far as you could see fell to their knees to worship.

Everyone except three young Jewish men who had been captured in Jerusalem when it had been conquered. They're now in training to become leaders in their new country. Humanly speaking they had absolutely nothing to gain by defying the king and everything to lose. Even so, they didn't bow down. No one might have noticed, except they were ratted out by someone on the king's payroll.

Well, Nebuchadnezzar has these three guys brought in. It seems he likes these guys because he's willing to give them a chance. He says something like, "Boys, you're not from these parts. Maybe you didn't understand. I built this ninety-foot statue. Your part is get on your knees and worship. Now you probably didn't get it so I'm giving you a second chance. If you'll just get on your knees and worship, everything's ok."

Now most people would have thought, "Ok. We've lodged our protest. The king seems real serious about this. So why not just go along to get along. After all, just because we bow physically doesn't mean we're doing it inwardly. We can worship the true God in our hearts." But that's not what happened. The three guys just said, nope, won't do it.

I don't know about you but there's something in me that wants to have that level of courage and conviction. There have been days when I haven't lived by what I believed as much as I would want. So I want to help myself to live up to this example; to live up to my convictions and I want to help you live up to yours, so I want to talk about what it means to live a life of integrity and about some insights from this story.

The first key to living a life of integrity is **1. I Need to Predetermine What's Right.** I have to get it straight ahead of time. During your life you're going to face tens of thousands of ethical and moral decisions. Some of them will be life defining. Some of them won't seem that big. But they will all shape and form your character. You need a well-established moral compass to help you navigate those decisions.

These situations can help you to discover what you truly value and really believe. It's important to determine ahead of time before the test comes what you believe because if you wait until the test comes you're more likely to weaken or compromise. You can be certain, though, that every day your convictions will be put to the test in some way.

The convictions of the three guys were put to the acid test. But they had a set of convictions that they were not willing to compromise on. The word of God had become their moral compass. They had learned the truths of the Bible. Those truths had become part of the fabric of their character.

They knew Exodus 20 where the Lord gave the Ten Commandments. They knew, *"You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above, or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them."* Case closed! These three guys said we're not bending.

You've got to read, study and absorb the truth of the Bible to determine what's non-negotiable in life, the convictions that will guide you, your moral compass for everything in life.

How big of an issue is this in our culture? George Barna does a lot of surveying of popular culture. In one survey he discovered that fifty percent of adults said that when they base their moral decisions on "whatever will bring the most pleasing or satisfying results." The conclusion of the survey was this: Most people do not believe there is any source of absolute moral truth. Regardless of their faith affiliation, people wing it when it comes to moral decisions.

In a separate survey, he discovered that only thirty-five percent believe in absolute standards of morality.

But in this church if we're true to what we say, we find ourselves in a different spot. We believe in absolute truth. We believe that God has spoken. In Isaiah 45 God says, *"I publicly proclaim bold promises. I do not whisper obscurities in some dark corner. I would not have told the people of Israel to seek me if I could not be found. I, the Lord, speak only what is true and declare only what is right."*

An essential underlying presumption of Christianity is that our faith is revelational. We believe God has spoken; that God is not some silent, impersonal force; that truth isn't hidden or kept us from it. God has given us the word and God means what God says.

Now, there are some parts and passages of the Bible I don't understand completely. But the basics, even children can get. If you're having some difficulty with the complex texts, just work first on living and obeying the parts you do understand – that's a big enough challenge for anyone.

Psalms 119:59 says *"I pondered the direction of my life, and I turned to follow your laws."* Those three guys had already made their decision. They thought about their life, they decided to do what God had said. They had a set of non-negotiables that they were clear about. They already knew what's right. They knew before they ever got in that situation what their answer would be to a situation like that. That's key to successfully navigating life's challenges.

Some people say, well, I wasn't sure what was right. If you're not sure, stick with your convictions even closer. In the early church they had questions about what was right or wrong, given they were in a very diverse culture. What practices were tolerable and what ones weren't. One of the questions was about eating food that had been cooked in certain ways or food that had been prepared in accord with another faith's worship. Paul said that it really didn't matter - food was food. The other faith was false, so it didn't really have any effect.

But Paul had a qualifier to that. He said, "But if you have doubts about whether or not you should eat something, you are sinning if you go ahead and do it. For you are not following your convictions. If you do anything you believe is not right, you are sinning." Many things in the world are fine to allow in your life. If a bakery you like is run by a family of another faith, it's not a problem - the food is the same. If you enjoy a piece of music that doesn't contradict Christian beliefs but was written by a non-believer, that's fine. When they called a car brand a "Saturn" it didn't mean you were honoring the false God Saturn by driving one.

I would have no trouble with any of these, because my convictions are clear, But if yours aren't, you have to stick to the strictest interpretation. You have no right to tell anyone else that they have to as well, but you have to. Your personal doubt compels that.

Next, **2. I Need to Do What's Right Consistently.** This is about alignment between belief and behavior. Between what we say we accept as true and what we do on a day to day basis. It's one thing to know what's right and true. It's something else to have the courage to act on it here and now. The actions of the three men verifies what they say they believe. Their action show it's a conviction in their heart.

When you face tough decisions get yourself in the habit of asking, What's the right thing to do? Most often – not always but usually – you really do know. It's not really what's right that's in question, it's what will you do about what's right and will you do it in the right way. I can't stand before you to say I always follow through and have the courage to do everything that I know is right and do it in the right way. But usually I find that, if I really dig down, I really do know what I should do.

Living with character, living an integrated life means doing the right thing. It's about doing the right thing because God has said it was right. When you live under the Lordship of Christ, you really don't have a lot of options. There's no backdoor, no loophole, no exception clause.

As a pastor, that can be especially difficult. Sometimes you have to go with what you know is right, even though people you love and respect think something different. Paul had to disagree even with Peter when it came to something Paul knew better and had experience with that Peter didn't have. As a pastor, if you're doing what God has called you to do, you are constantly praying and learning and studying and meditating and consulting and listening. In all of that you have to discern where God is leading you; where God wants you to lead the congregation - because that's the actual Biblical definition of what it means to be a pastor - shepherd, overseer, chief leader.

Sometimes, that means you have to lead in directions that aren't popular with everyone, but if that's the life that God has called you to, there's no choice in the matter.

The fact is that's not easy. But doing what's right when it's not popular is not easy for any of us. It's not easy for me. It's not easy for any leader in the church. It's not easy for any Christian, no matter how old or young we are. We live in a time where our choices have been widened and multiplied. There are so many possibilities and so many places where we can make the wrong choice. I've discovered that as a twenty-first century follower of Jesus Christ I need a firm moral perimeter around my life and around my behavior.

It's a matter of consistency. Psalm 119:4-6 says *"You have charged us to keep your commandments carefully. Oh, that my actions would consistently reflect your decrees! Then I will not be ashamed when I compare my life with your commands."* Recently I heard about a group of Australian soldiers who, during World War II, fought a battle off the southeast coast of Borneo. In this battle they landed on the shore, secured a beachhead and then they took the land they had been assigned to hold. But to keep the land they had to keep on patrolling the perimeter. One of the men said, "The only means of securing the perimeter was by constant offensive patrol. The enemy had not evacuated the area. Every day there were patrol clashes and at night they continued their infiltration tactics."

Notice the phrase "offense patrolling." You and I need to offensively patrol the perimeter of our integrity. That means no cheating around the edges. That means no days off. That means no small indiscretions. That means not listening to the lies we often tell ourselves when confronted with moral and ethical decisions. Things like "No one will ever know... This is just how I am... That's just how we do it in this business... or, This is the last time, I promise... or, I just can't help myself." But in those moments of temptation, in those moments when we're wrestling with this, we need to listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit, which says to us, "You know it's wrong." In your mind you can come up with a thousand rationalizations and reasons and excuses why you ignore that little voice. But it keeps coming back and saying, "You know this isn't right."

Psalm 106 says *"Blessed are they who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right."* Do the right thing, don't give an inch. Sin is crouching at the door and would love to take you down. We're always just one decision, one compromise away from putting a crack in our character.

Proverbs 10:9 says, *"You'll be safe if you always do right. But you will get caught if you're dishonest."* You know it's wrong. *Do right.* You know what's right. *You'll be safe if you always do right.* Make the decision now to do it.

I want to be candid with you this morning. There can be a price tag attached to doing what's right. The three guys knew that very well. Look at Daniel 3:17-18, *"If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from your majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, your majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."* They said, we've made up our minds. We've drawn a line in the sand and we are willing even to pay the ultimate price of losing our lives because we are so convinced of these convictions are from God.

Let me tell you a couple of things that can be helpful when you're faced with these tough decisions. First, and I've talked about this in other contexts, try to focus on the greatness of God. Sometimes you'll start to worry about what'll

happen to you and what consequences you'll face and what will you'll do. Your world becomes just about you. Everything there was about you. But when you focus on the greatness of God and realize how powerful God is and how God really cares about your life then I think you'll find your fears begin to quiet.

The second thing is to remind yourself whose approval and pleasure you live for. It's real easy to start living for the approval and pleasure of your boss or your spouse or a friend or what the world says. But at the end of the day for those of us who are Christ's followers the measurement of our life, the ultimate appraisal of our life, is based on our faithfulness to obey and love God. Nothing else at the end of the day really matters.

The commitment of the Christian life includes the decision that even when life seems to be unfair, even if I can't figure out what God is doing, I will still choose to live a life of integrity. I'll not speak wickedness. I'll not be deceitful. I will choose to stick with what I know to be true about God regardless of what my emotions are telling me.

That takes courage. Ambrose Redmoon said, "Courage is not the absence of fear. Rather the judgment that something is more important than fear."

Proverbs 21:3 tells us, "*The Lord is more pleased when we do what is right and just than when we offer him sacrifices.*" Simple. Direct. More than God wants our religious service, even our offerings, He says do what's right.

One final one is, **3. I Need to Have the Right Spirit.** God not only cares that you do what's right. God wants you to do it with the right attitude. With a spirit of grace and love and kindness. I like how those three Guys handled themselves. They weren't obnoxious, belligerent or antagonistic. They didn't tell the king that he was a vain idiot for building the statue and expecting everyone to treat it like some holy thing. They simply say, "We can't do that. We won't do that."

As Christians, we are recreated to be something new and different. Ephesians 4:23-24 says, "*...let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy.*" Being holy is a much higher bar than being good. We can't do that alone - we have to constantly let the Spirit renew us.

Being holy is about doing the right thing in the right way. Ephesians 4:15 says "*Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church.*" It's counter-cultural. Everything in our culture says get your own, get even, take what's yours, don't let anybody kick you around, demand your rights. Yet Jesus says things like Be kind, Demonstrate patience, Love your enemies, Pray for them, Serve those who've wrong you. That's the kind of attitude; the kind of holiness he expects.

I want to be very clear. It's never, ever, ever your right as a Christ follower to be mean spirited, it's never your prerogative to be nasty, spiteful, hurtful or obnoxious in the name of Jesus. Every now and then I meet a Christian who carries persecution as a badge of honor. They say things like, "I'm taking my stand for Jesus Christ and I'm being persecuted because of my faith." Sometimes I want to say to them, "No, you're not. You're being persecuted because you're acting like a jerk to a lot of people and you probably should be persecuted. You're tempting me to persecute you myself! You don't get any credit for that."

In 1 Peter 2 we read, "*For God is pleased when, conscious of his will, you patiently endure unjust treatment. Of course, you get no credit for being patient if you are beaten for doing wrong. But if you suffer for doing good and endure it patiently, God is pleased with you.*" Being a jerk for Jesus is no badge to honor. Be gracious, kind and loving no matter what.

Let's wrap up the story. The king is so enraged at these three guys he has them bound up. His anger is so out of control he says, "Heat up the furnace seven times hotter than usual." Then he has these three guys thrown in the fire.

The king watches but can't believe he's seeing what he thinks he sees. He leaps up from his chair and gets as close to the fire as he can so he can look in. And not only are the three men still there not burned up, but now there's a fourth person in the fire with them. Nebuchadnezzar describes him as a Son of God. Christian Bible scholars speculate that it was a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ.

But whatever else you get from that, I want you to get this: When you choose what's right and live by your convictions I can't promise that what happens is going to be comfortable or safe or to your advantage. Some people have been through the furnace and didn't come back out. Many of God's prophets in Old Testament times were murdered by the very people they were sent to. John the Baptist spoke out, lived as holy a life as was possible and got his head cut off. Stephen - one of the leaders of the early church - stood up to the crowd to proclaim the resurrection and they stoned him. And, after all, Jesus - God himself - wasn't rescued from the cross - he had to go

through it. He wasn't rescued from the cross but you and I were rescued BY the cross. Even the worst of outcomes for the individual or even for groups or nations can be victories for God's Kingdom.

2 Timothy 2:21 says, *"If you keep yourself pure, you will be a special utensil for honorable use. Your life will be clean, and you will be ready for the Master to use you for every good work."* If you're willing to commit to doing the right thing; the Godly thing, God will use you in amazing ways. I can't promise you a fairy tale ending or that everything is going to turn out like you'd hoped. What I do feel confident in promising you is that if you'll walk in his way, Jesus will walk with you through whatever you go through. And that's enough. If you have that, it is enough. Let's pray.