

## A Biblical Survey of Integrity

Harold Gardner, a Professor of Education at Harvard University, studied some of the most influential leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his study of ten great leaders, he found only two commonalities with them all. It was neither height nor weight, extroversion nor introversion, rich nor poor, or social skills nor the lack thereof. The only two traits he could find between all of his leaders are that each of these leaders knew how to share their story, and lived it out.<sup>1</sup> It's precisely here that we have the idea of integrity.

The Latin etymological root for *integrity* is *integer*, meaning “entire,” “whole” or “complete.” To have integrity means that we are whole people, that our outward persona matches the inside, that our actions complete our words. Each of these ten great leaders had this kind of integrity, where they were able to relate their story and live it out — embody it. Leaders are complete people, not disparate or disjointed, when they are able to live with complete integrity with themselves, with others and ultimately toward God. It's easy to see that integrity is quite related to having *shalom*, a peace that comes from wholeness.

Even easier to see is that integrity is foundational to an effective Bible-centered leader. When you have a person who is able to embody the very things they teach, they will have great power to influence on the planet. In this way, Jesus is the ultimate person of integrity, and lived out his credo and mission to the very end. He embodied the very lessons of love, grace and truth that he taught to his followers, even to his death. Without disparaging the fact that he is indeed God in human form, Jesus' life had great power because he lived it out with such great integrity. In fact, it may be precisely because Jesus is God that he was able to live with such great wholeness of purpose, meaning and action.

On the flipside, a lack of integrity can tear down a leader's legacy. According to Bobby Clinton, few leaders finish well. In his estimation, it's about one in three. Clinton also goes on to identify six barriers to finishing well, and most have to do with a lack of integrity: the use and abuse of finances, the abuse of power, inordinate pride, sex, family issues and plateauing. In other words, the difference between a leader who finishes well and one who does not can often come down to one word: integrity.

Clinton's definition of integrity is:

*Integrity, the top leadership character quality, is the consistency of inward beliefs and convictions with outward practice. It is an honesty and wholeness of personality in which one operates with a clear conscience in dealings with self and others.*<sup>2</sup>

In sum, effective leaders are people of integrity.

### Biblical case studies of integrity

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Gardner, *Leading Minds: An Anatomy of Leadership* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 9.

<sup>2</sup> J. Robert Clinton, “Integrity — A Top Leadership Quality,” *Clinton's Bible Leadership Commentary* (Self-published draft, 1999), 444.

To our great benefit, the Bible is a wonderful collection of case studies on integrity. It is replete with examples of great leaders who had integrity, and other leaders who lacked it. However, the data points of integrity in Scripture are so overwhelming that an exhaustive study of integrity in Scripture would be impossible to complete in a few pages. Here are some highlights instead:

#### *Patriarchal Leadership Era*

*Abraham.* After receiving the blessing from God — that he would become a great nation in Genesis 12 — he failed to trust God in subsequent situations and took matters back into his own hands. When they entered the land of Egypt later in Genesis 12, Abram told a half-lie to protect his life from jealous suitors: Sarai is his sister. In his deception, he ended up selling his wife off to Pharaoh. Though God’s intervention returned Sarai back to him, Abram did not pass this integrity check.

Later in Genesis 16, he again took matters into his own hands. He didn’t yet have an heir, so Sarai persuaded him to sleep with her maid, Hagar. In his lack of trust in God’s promises yet again, he attempted to create his own future and please his wife, which only resulted in a high amount of jealousy from Sarah and greater dysfunction in the family. Another integrity check failed.

In facing the same situation as in Genesis 12, Abraham responded in the same sinful way again. He told the same, tired half-lie to another monarch, this time the King of Gerar in Genesis 20. Again God’s intervention kept Sarah from harm. But again, Abraham did not pass this integrity check, not believing in God’s promises to fulfill his destiny.

It seemed that God wanted Abraham to learn this lesson, so he brought up yet another integrity check, again addressing the issue of Abraham’s legacy. In Genesis 22, Abraham was asked to put his heir to death. This time, he passed the test, willing to take the life of his son. Again, God intervenes, but this time on his behalf, and he provided another offering instead. Later, the writer of Hebrews 11 believed that Abraham was willing to go through with the sacrifice because he trusted in God’s promises, that his great nation would come through Isaac (Gen 17:19). So, he believed that even if he took his son’s own life, he would be raised from the dead. He finally learned the lesson, and is remembered as the father of a great nation.

*Jacob.* The grandson of Abraham was a slippery one. Jacob means “he who grasps the heel” which has connotations of deception and trickery. He would live up to his namesake. First, he extorted his older brother out of his birthright in Genesis 25. Then, he deceived his way into receiving his older brother’s blessing in Genesis 27. But, deception begets deception.

Later, he met his match with his Uncle Laban, who extorted him into seven years of labor and then tricked him into another seven more in Genesis 29. At the same time, Jacob used his own guile to obtain wealth from his uncle’s flock in Genesis 30. All of this trickery created tension and dysfunction in the family, where Rachel was jealous of her sister and rival wife Leah’s pregnancies. His family would continue to wheel and deal in many more future situations, such as Rachel selling her right to a night with her husband for some mandrakes in Genesis 30.

Ultimately, all of Jacob's tricks caught up with him. He sneaked off with all of his family and property to return home in Genesis 31, while his wife learned a few tricks of her own and stole her father's household goods. But, on his journey home, he was greeted by his older brother Esau and 400 other men. They met with embraces, yet Jacob again used lies to escape his brother's grasp, though we're not sure whether or not Esau meant to harm his little brother in Genesis 33. Though God seemed to bless him, his life of trickery created great dysfunction within his household, so much so that they turned on each other and would eventually sell one of their own to slavery and lie to cover it up.

*Joseph.* Joseph didn't so much lack integrity as he lacked tact in his youth. He boasted about his dreams to his family about how they will all bow to him one day, which created a great deal of contempt against him. Later, his own brothers sold him off to slavery.

However, the life of a slave seemed to have humbled him, and he began to live with great integrity. In Genesis 39, his life of integrity allowed his master to trust him with all of his household affairs. But, his master's wife took a liking to this young, handsome Hebrew boy and attempted to seduce him day by day. But he stood his ground.

One day, she became aggressive and grabbed at his cloak to seduce him. But instead of succumbing, he immediately ran outside leaving the cloak in her hands. She made up a story about how he came on to her, and Joseph was placed in prison. Apparently, however, the master didn't think that Joseph was too guilty; he placed him in a royal prison with a cupbearer and a baker — not exactly the state penitentiary. According to Middle Assyrian laws, rapists were executed. Thus, the master must have seen Joseph's integrity, even here, but may have had his hand forced. He would have to choose this servant over his wife, and that would be too costly a decision. He seemed to go easy on Joseph nonetheless.

Ultimately, through a series of fortunate events and divine interventions, Joseph became the governor of Egypt and saved much of the world by rationing food during times of plenty so when the famine came, they had food to spare. He even saw great purpose in his slavery and years in prison: what his brothers intended for evil, God intended for good to save the family (Gen 45:4-8). He finished well and his integrity gave him great favor throughout his lifetime. He was a great leader.

#### *Pre-Kingdom Leadership Era*

*Aaron & the Levites.* Moses' brother Aaron was a leader, and would later become the priest of Israel. His leadership was sorely tested, however, when Moses and Joshua was a long time in coming down from the mountain. In Moses' absence, the people wanted Aaron to make gods who would lead them. (Some of the lure of idol worship is that the rites of these Ancient Near Eastern gods often permitted the people to have sex with each other as a part of the worship practices.) So, instead of standing his ground here, Aaron took gold from the people of Israel and created a golden calf, presenting it as their gods who brought them out of Egypt in Genesis 32. A party ensued.

When Moses came down from the mountain, he was furious. When called to account, Aaron attempted to shift the blame, saying that he threw the gold into the fire and

out came a calf! To purify a nation, Moses called to his fellow-tribesmen and told them to strap on swords to kill family, friend and neighbor. They did exactly what they were told, and 3,000 people were killed that day in Genesis 32. Though it's hard for the modern reader to hear, God blessed the Levites for their insistence on obedience and integrity throughout the camp, and thus they confirmed their ordination as priests. But from another viewpoint, Aaron's disobedience caused the deaths of 3,000 people. Where integrity was needed, Aaron did not stand his ground and gave in to the pressures of the people with dire consequences.

*Achan.* Achan took forbidden plunder in a raid in Joshua 7, which caused the defeat of Israel at Ai. His lack of integrity not only caused the loss of his own life, but also the lives of his family and 36 fighters of Israel. When purity was restored to the camp, they were able to rout Ai.

*Gideon.* In Judges 6, Gideon passed an integrity check. He was called to tear down his father's Baal altar and Asherah pole, and leave a sacrifice on the embers of that pole. He didn't have the courage to do it during the day, but still completes the act by night. He stood up for himself when found out, saying that Baal should fight his own battles. As a result, the Spirit of God comes upon him and he routed the Midianites and the Amalekites. Integrity was rewarded with solid leadership and victory.

*Samuel.* Samuel's mother offered him to the priesthood as a promise to God, and he served well. Early in his boyhood, it was clear that he had a gift of hearing from God. Even when he heard a message that was hard to deliver, he didn't waver from his integrity and shared the message, as in 1 Samuel 3. As a result, God made sure that Samuel's prophetic record was impeccable (1 Sam 3:19).

In 1 Samuel 8, however, Samuel's sons were not acting with the same integrity as he was. They took what they could get for themselves, taking bribes and corrupting justice. In light of their lack of integrity, the people rebelled and did not want Samuel's family to lead them anymore and demanded a king in 1 Samuel 8.

But still Samuel stayed true. Even when it would have benefited him or his family to lie, Samuel knew that God was giving them a king, and so he did not get in the way. He continued to give the words of God, just as he heard them. He was an effective leader throughout his lifetime, always delivering the word of God even when it was not popular, and remained an influential leader throughout the rise of the monarchy.

### *Kingdom Leadership Era*

*Saul.* Samuel's replacement as leader of the country, however, was not as stellar in his integrity. His reign started strong, but early in his career, he lost his trust in God. In one instance, he could not wait any longer for Samuel to show up before a battle, so he took the sacrifices into his own hands in 1 Samuel 13. Because he didn't have integrity to stand firm in the face of his own fears and impulses, God took away his blessing of his kingship.

Saul's reign only became worse. At one point, he uttered a foolish promise, saying that anyone who ate anything before evening would die in 1 Samuel 14. He made a vow that he couldn't keep. Later, it was found out that Jonathan, his son, had tasted some honey for refreshment. Saul attempted to keep his vow, but the army rebelled and protected the popular and well-loved Jonathan. He couldn't keep his promise, and his authority was

compromised. His leadership was weakening, and he had bitter wars with the Phillistines throughout his lifetime as a reminder of God's disfavor (1 Sam 14:52).

He would continue to act on his own impulses instead of obeying God: he took plunder, disobeying God's commands in 1 Samuel 15. Saul later becomes more and more angry and depressed, an unstable man who attempts to kill his harpist — the future king of Israel — with a spear, twice (1 Sam 18, 19). In the end, his reign ends without much fanfare, and he and his son is killed in battle. God's judgment: "I am grieved that I ever made Saul king" (1 Sam 15:11).

*David.* David also started out with everything for him. He is zealous for God's reputation, and it led to the defeat of the giant Goliath in 1 Sam 17, which catapulted his popularity with the people. He showed great integrity in the way he dealt with Saul, where he had the opportunity to kill him twice, but allowed God to deliver judgment instead in 1 Samuel 24 and 26. His authority solidified.

However, it came apart when he fell into temptation in 2 Samuel 11. At a time when the kings were off to war, he stayed back in the palace and his eyes fell on beautiful Bathsheba while he was bathing. He knew that she belonged to one of his men, a fighter who was risking his life for a country that was not his own. But, he invited her to the palace and slept with her. She became pregnant, and when a few attempts to cover it up do not work, he conspired to have her husband killed in battle. He piled sin on top of sin.

To his credit, when his sin is outed by the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 12, David stopped covering up and wholeheartedly repented of his sin. Here, he displayed a great deal of integrity by confessing his sins and later reflecting on it in Psalm 51. He would be described as a man after God's heart.

Nevertheless, he had to live with the consequences of his mistakes. It seemed that his own sins are perhaps the cause of his inability to discipline his own children, so much so that they kill and rape each other, and attempt to overthrow his authority and kingdom (2 Sam 13, 15). His reign could've been so much more if he did not give into temptation and held fast with integrity.

*Josiah.* In a history of kings that are overwhelmingly filled with disobedience to God — none of the kings of Israel follow God, though a few of the kings of Judah do — Josiah stood out as a breath of fresh air. He knew the value of honesty, as he gave a blank check for those repairing the Temple because they were honest men (2 Ki 22: 3-7). As they were cleaning up the Temple, they found the Book of God's Revelation, and as they read it, they realized that they hadn't lived up to its commands.

In response, Josiah placed his new convictions into action, leading many reforms in 2 Kings 23. He rid the Temple of any idol worship, fired the pagan priests, cleaned up the local sex-and-religion shrines, threw out the male prostitutes, and destroyed the furnace of Topheth that was used for child sacrifices. In his reputation, the author of 2 Kings wrote that there was no king like Josiah, either before or afterward, who turned to God as he did (2 Ki 23:25). I can think of no better epitaph.

### *Post-Kingdom Leadership Era*

*Nehemiah.* Nehemiah was a great example of integrity in leadership. He was clearly a person of some character to be the cupbearer for the king of a foreign land: the cupbearer had to be trusted because he tested the king's food for poison.

Later, as he began building the wall in Jerusalem, he was above-board with his finances. He called the Israelites to account when they became loan sharks, creating unjust systems of debt that allowed them to buy other sons and daughters as their slaves. Nehemiah called for a stop of usury, using his own life as an example of loaning without extortion (Neh 5:10). He also did not take advantage of his governor's possession, refusing the food allowance and not taxing the people. In addition, he fed 150 Jews and officials at his dining table (Neh 5:14-19). He was a person of integrity when it came to finances, and this built a great deal of trust and authority for his leadership.

In the face of intense opposition, he also would not use the Temple as a hideout. He continued to walk with integrity in his leadership, not allowing people even a foothold to discredit him (Neh 6:11). He felt that he had lived a life of integrity that his last prayer was that God would remember him for the deeds he has done. It must have felt peaceful to know that he had lived a life of integrity.

*Daniel & his friends.* Daniel was also exemplary in his integrity. Even as a young man in a foreign country, he would not defile himself with royal food in Daniel 1. So, he was wise enough to wheel a deal with the head of the palace staff, and they were found to be even healthier with their vegetarian diet. His health improved because of his willingness to take a stand, even if it was a small one.

In chapter 3, Daniel's friends would not bow down to a foreign god. They were willing to die for their faith, knowing that God could save them but may choose not to (Dan 3:16-18). As their reward, they were saved from the burning furnace, and God's name was remembered and exalted in this foreign land by decree. God was glorified by their insistence to stay true to him.

Later in chapter 6, Daniel's status caused jealousy in the king's court. So, the other vice-regents and governors created a scheme to trap him. They tricked the King to sign a law that would prohibit the worship and prayer to anyone else but the King, knowing that Daniel would break this law. Instead of hiding out, Daniel opened wide the shutters and continued to pray three times a day. Trapped, the King was forced to send Daniel to the lion's den, though it grieved him. But while in the den, God shut the mouths of the lions so that Daniel was safe. Again, God was glorified by the integrity these men showed in the face of a foreign government.

### *Pre-Church Leadership Era*

*Jesus.* It is almost too obvious to state, but Jesus himself was a person of great integrity throughout his lifetime. But, one place where it stood out is in Matthew 4, when he was out in the desert being tempted by the Devil. Each temptation that the Devil brought must have actually been temptations, relevant and hard-to-fight shortcuts to something that will eventually be rightfully his in the future. With each test, Jesus countered with Scripture and

successfully overcame each test. His victories over temptation marked the start of a public, three-year, world-changing ministry.

Throughout his teaching, he called his followers to serve each other. He said that if anyone wanted to be great among you, he must be the servant of all in Mark 9:35. Not only did he teach it, however, he also lived it. In John 13, he knew that all things were put under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God. So, what did he do? Did he subjugate the world under his great, oppressive power? Did he demand that every knee bow before him at that moment? No, instead he tied a towel around his waist and began to do what no servant would've done in those times because it was too low: he began to wash their feet. And, their teacher's example stands the test of two millennia's time.

### *Church Leadership Era*

*Ananias & Sapphira.* As the early church was just getting under way, Ananias and Sapphira were followers of the Way of Jesus. But, when they sold their house, they kept some of the profits for themselves, but told the church that they had given all of their profits to them. They were seeking a better reputation, while cheating the church.

They were caught, however, and they were struck down and killed by the Spirit. Purity in the church and a healthy reverence for God was restored. The early church would not have missed the parallel to Achan, who in the creation of a nation disobeyed God, brought impurity to the community in Judges 7. With the creation of the new church, the Spirit again was demanding purity and integrity within the community.

*Paul.* Paul, the great church planter of the Church Leadership era, found himself needing to defend his own character and ministry even though he lived a life of integrity. His second letter to the Corinthians is his defense.

First, his words were under fire. The Corinthians accused him of going back on his word when he didn't visit them. But, he didn't visit because he wanted to spare them the pain (2 Cor 1:23ff). He had to explain himself, and was open and honest with them.

He also had to defend his character. But, if anyone had a reason to boast about piety and credentials, none could compare with Paul. In Philippians 3, he had the credentials to be the best of all religious Jews. But, he considered it all lost for the sake of following Jesus. He had been through much suffering for the sake of the Gospel, undergoing persecution, torture, hardship, hunger, thirst, nakedness and even a shipwreck (2 Cor 3). His life was not one of comfort and luxury, but hardship in trying to bring the Gospel to every corner of the world. He lived a life of sacrifice and simplicity, and was not becoming wealthy from what he was doing. He embodied the Christian life.

He had to defend his finances. In 1 Corinthians 9, he explained that though he had the right to ask for their support, he never did. The Gospel never cost them one cent. Now, in 2 Corinthians, he defended himself again, saying that he never took one penny for himself. All of the offering taken would go to the poor, and he set up a system of accountability so they can be doubly sure that their money will go to the right places. He did not take any chances, so that Jesus' name would not be discredited.

Near the end of his ministry, he met with the elders of Ephesus in Miletus while on his way to Jerusalem in Acts 20. They knew him so intimately that he could say, “You know that...” and they would know all about him. Here, he says without guilt, that he took care of his own basic needs and did not exploit anyone. He says:

*You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. (Acts 20:19-21, NIV)*

They knew him, and he lived the life — the eternal kind of life.

*Leadership requirements.* When it came to leadership requirements in the early church, Paul wrote about character traits more than anything. In 1 Timothy 3, the leaders were to be above reproach, sincere, and not after dishonest gain. They were to be the kind of people that could be trusted. In Titus, Paul again states that they needed to be blameless. In both passages, leaders were held accountable to their families: if their families do not follow Jesus, then how can they influence others as well? Their families were a reflection of them, because their families would know them the best, when all the guards are down. They would know if their Dad embodied the faith, and would make decisions to follow Jesus based on their Dad’s example.

Through the long history of Biblical leaders, it is clear that the effectiveness of a Biblical leader is directly tied to his or her life of integrity. They are inseparable. When they live in integrity and wholeness, God explicitly goes with them. When they do not, then God leaves them.

### **Implications for today’s leaders**

During the last half of 1999, I served as a pastoral intern at Onnuri Presbyterian Church, a 20,000-member church located in the heart of Seoul, Korea. God blessed the ministries I was a part of while I was there, the English-speaking service increased from 400 to 700, and the youth group increased from 250 to 450. Many people were starting to walk with Jesus for the first time. At the same time, I met and started dating Jinhee who would eventually become my wife. Everything was going right.

Near the end of my six-month internship, the church offered me a full-time position, offering to double my salary, while also providing housing, a car and a cell phone. They really pursued me, and the offer was tempting because I wanted to stay in Korea with Jinhee and the thriving ministries. (Jinhee wouldn’t be able to leave for States because of work commitments for another four months.) However, I promised the ministries back in Boston that I would return right after my internship. Though they let me go for six months, they depended on me to provide leadership and supervision. I was torn.

In the middle of the decision-process, I asked my pastor back in Boston for any advice he would give me for clarity in the situation. He said something that will always stick:



“James, if there’s one thing you have that you cannot compromise as a person in ministry is your integrity.” That’s all he had to say. From that moment on, I knew that I had to turn down the offer to stay in Korea, and head home, even though that meant I left a great job opportunity and my future wife for a short time. I had to keep my word.

When I came back, I found Clinton’s three-part pattern to an *integrity check* come to life.<sup>3</sup> First, I was challenged to be consistent with my inner convictions. Would I stick to my word or not? Second, I had to respond, and God gave me the grace to choose to fulfill my word. Third, a result of passing an integrity check leads to a resulting expansion, and the ministry back in Boston had its best season under my leadership up to that time.

Ministry is complex, and the pitfalls are legion. Often, leaders see these pitfalls and temptations as nagging nuisances or soul-crumbling afflictions. However, they can also be seen as an opportunity to grow into the influence you were meant to have. Either we embrace the lesson and pass the check, or we will find ourselves faced with that same situation over and over again — like Abraham — until we learn the lesson or opt ourselves out of greater influence.

My pastor was right: a leader cannot compromise their integrity in the ministry. Ministers are not often rich or famous (though a few come to be). But, one currency that the Christian leader often deals with is trust. In the business of influence, we can put deposits or make withdrawals in the trust bank. According to Patrick Lencioni’s *Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, trust is the very foundation upon which teams and organizations thrive.<sup>4</sup> If we lose that trust, then our ability to make an impact in the lives of others draws up default. Integrity is a deal-breaker: the lack of integrity will be a sure-fire way to create distrust, animosity and apathy. Without trust, a leader has no authority to influence.

Ministering with integrity, however, creates spiritual authority and trust. To thrive as an effective, Bible-centered leader, integrity is something that we cannot afford to lose and must take great care to keep.

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<sup>3</sup> Clinton, “Integrity,” 446.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 43.

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