

CHARACTER STILL COUNTS

James Merritt



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INTEGRITY:

Living Under the Microscope

In order to be a leader a man must have followers. And to have followers, a man must have their confidence. Hence, the supreme quality for a leader is unquestionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible... If a man's associates find him guilty of being phony, if they find that he lacks forthright integrity, he will fail. His teachings and actions must square with each other.

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER¹

Antonie van Leeuwenhoek isn't a household name, which isn't surprising since he's been dead for almost four hundred years. And yet his life still touches the entire world. This Dutch businessman, a self-taught man in science, is commonly known as "the father of microbiology" and is credited with one of the greatest inventions in history—the microscope.

The microscope is an optical instrument that is used to see objects that are so small they would otherwise be invisible. The invention of the microscope was invaluable—children no longer have to fear the diseases of polio and smallpox, couples can now conceive children

through in vitro fertilization, criminals are apprehended and convicted by DNA evidence, minimally invasive surgery is now possible because of this tool. Most of the advances of the twentieth century were made using a microscope.

The effects of a microscope can be even more devastating when an object that is so big that it is visible to the entire world is put under its viewing power. I am referring to the Catholic Church, which is facing its most serious crisis in more than five hundred years. A wave of clerical sexual abuse revelations hit the church like a tsunami. It left the world in shock and the Catholic Church reeling. Thousands of cases of child molestation by members of the clergy have been reported from Australia, to Chile, to Germany, to the United States. One US grand jury report documented one thousand children abused by three hundred priests in the state of Pennsylvania alone over seventy years.²

What was equally appalling was the cover-up. One cardinal, the former archbishop of Washington and a member of the College of Cardinals, had to resign when credible accusations were made that he had sexually abused a minor and harassed seminarians whom he supervised. Amazingly, he had even played a leadership role in the church's response to the last US clerical sexual abuse scandal in 2002.³

Protestants have their own issues. Highly visible megachurch pastors who have had to resign over sexual misconduct have become almost routine. My denomination, the largest evangelical denomination in America,⁴ recently received the resignation of a former president of the convention—and the leader of the most powerful entity in the denomination—over sexual impropriety. It used to be the question was, “Is nothing sacred?” Now the question being asked is, “Is sacred nothing?”

Don't be fooled. The problem that both the largest church in the world and the largest evangelical denomination in America face is not sexual impropriety, misconduct, or abuse. The cover-up is just

a symptom of the deeper problem, which is a lack of integrity. The most powerful microscope in the world can't detect one flaw in the cell of integrity.

Of course, religious institutions aren't the only ones struggling with integrity. Business leaders cook books, falsify expense reports, evade taxes, and inflate profits. In the world of sports, athletes take performance-enhancing drugs and boxers throw matches. And then there is politics, which needs no explanation. This arena might actually rank last in moral character.

The Buck Stops Here

If character were a deck of cards, integrity would be the trump card. If you were building a house of character, the foundation would be integrity. Integrity would be “the first man up.”

In his book *Integrity*, Stephen Carter called this virtue the “first among virtues because...in some sense [it] is prior to everything else. The rest of what we think matters little if we lack essential integrity and the courage of our convictions, the willingness to act and speak on behalf of what is right.”⁵

The fountainhead of the river of character is integrity, because all other virtues flow from this one character trait. Warren Buffet, the chairman and CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, realized the importance of integrity. He said, “We look for three things when we hire people. We look for intelligence, we look for initiative or energy, and we look for integrity. And if they don't have the latter, the first two will kill you.”⁶

People are replaceable. Integrity is not. The practice of integrity may be declining, but the importance of integrity is greater than ever. In 2012, successful businesswoman and investor Amy Rees Anderson wrote:

We live in a world where integrity isn't talked about nearly enough. We live in a world where “the end

justifies the means” has become an acceptable school of thought for far too many. Sales people over promise and under deliver, all in the name of making their quota for the month. Applicants exaggerate job interviews, because they desperately need a job. CEOs overstate projected earnings, because they don’t want the Board of Directors to replace them. . . . Customer service representatives cover up a mistake they’ve made because they are afraid the client will leave them. Employees call in “sick” because they don’t have any more paid time off when they actually just need to get their Christmas shopping done. The list could go on and on and in each case the person committing the act of dishonesty tells themselves they had a perfectly valid reason why the end result justified their lack of integrity.⁷

Years ago, I was in Beijing, China, and I could not wait to get to the Great Wall of China. It took the ancient Chinese more than two centuries to build this wall, which stretches more than twenty-one thousand kilometers and served the purpose of holding off invasions from the barbaric armies from the north. I marveled as I walked atop that wall so thick you couldn’t break through it, so long you couldn’t go around it, and so tall you couldn’t get over it. I could feel the security of that wall beneath my feet.

But my fascination was short-lived when my guide told me that within the first century after completion, China was successfully invaded three times by those northern barbarians. I said, “Did they go over the wall?” He said, “No.” I said, “Did they go around the wall?” He said, “No.” I said, “Did they go under the wall?” He said, “No.” I knew they didn’t go through the wall, so how did they get in? All three times they bribed the gatekeeper and walked right in.

I Know It When I See It

Integrity is a word that has such a deep and broad meaning that

capturing it in a single sentence is difficult. C.S. Lewis said, “Integrity is doing what is right when no one is looking.” I would tweak that to say, “Integrity is what you are when no one but God and you are looking.” Someone else has said, “Integrity is doing what you say you will do unless it is wrong.” As I have thought about it, I’ve settled on this hopefully all-encompassing definition: Integrity is always doing the right thing, at the right time, in the right place, regardless of the cost or the consequences.

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at the right time, in the right place, regardless
of the cost or the consequences.**

Bobby Jones is considered one of the best golfers in history. He won thirteen majors before he retired at the age of twenty-eight. He was the first player to win four major tournaments in one year. I recently got to meet his grandson, Bobby Jones IV, and he recounted to me a story about his grandfather. It wasn’t about a tournament that he won or a great shot that he made. It was about his integrity.

Bobby Jones took a one-shot penalty at the 1925 United States Open. He inadvertently touched his golf ball and assessed himself a one-stroke penalty even though no one else saw him touch the ball. The tournament official said he didn’t see it. His playing partner said he didn’t see it. No one in the gallery said that they saw it. They even tried to talk him out of assessing himself the penalty, and he would have been justified in not taking it. But Bobby Jones would not violate his conscience or compromise his integrity. He assessed himself the penalty and ultimately lost the Open by that one stroke.

When tournament officials tried to compliment him for his integrity, he said, “You might as well praise me for not breaking

into banks. There is only one way to play this game.” Jones could have won his fourteenth major, but he would have lost his integrity. To Bobby Jones, no win of any kind or size could ever compensate for the loss of one’s integrity.

Interestingly, *Webster’s Dictionary* defines integrity as “the quality or state of being complete,” and uses *wholeness* as a synonym. Interestingly, in the Old Testament, the word for integrity in the Hebrew is *tom*, and it literally means “whole and complete.”

The English word *integrity* derives from the Latin word *integer*, which means again, “whole and complete.” In mathematics, an integer is any number that is not a fraction, decimal, or a mixed number. In other words, integrity cannot be divided. You can’t have partial integrity. You can’t have integrity only in certain areas. If you possess integrity it covers the whole of your life, not just certain parts. Integrity is the blanket that covers the bed of all character traits.

Many people equate integrity with honesty, but integrity is more than honesty. In a sense, you can be honest without having integrity. If you are caught stealing, and you honestly confess your crime, you still lack integrity.

As Stephen Covey asserts, “Integrity includes, but goes beyond honesty. Honesty is telling the truth—in other words, *conforming our words to reality*. Integrity is *conforming reality to our words*—in other words, keeping promises and fulfilling expectations. This requires an *integrated character*, a one-ness, primarily with self, but also with life.”⁸

Live a Life of Integrity

One of the greatest pictures of integrity in history is found in the Old Testament account of Daniel. Anyone familiar with the Bible knows about Daniel and the lions’ den. But what is important about this story is not Daniel being thrown into the lions’ den, it is what happened before Daniel was thrown into the den and why he was thrown in. We see why integrity is so important and how to make it a part of our DNA of living.

It pleased Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel. The satraps were made accountable to them so that the king might not suffer loss (Daniel 6:1-2).

The king of the empire at this time was a pagan by the name of Darius. Evidently, he suspected that some of the people under him were embezzling money and being unfaithful employees. The empire was so vast that he knew he had to surround himself with the best people to ensure honesty and accountability. He knew that you are no better than the people you surround yourself with, so he sought the best people possible to help oversee the kingdom's affairs. One choice was obvious.

Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom (Daniel 6:3).

Daniel is about eighty-five years old. He has been serving the Lord in Babylon for over seventy years and he is now under his third king. This king is the new kid on the block, so he likely never even met Daniel. Though not everybody knew Daniel, everybody knew about Daniel. If you read the Book of Daniel, you will know that Daniel's reputation preceded him. For seven decades, Daniel had proven himself to be a man of impeccable integrity. Daniel was put in charge of everyone else and was made second in command only to the king.

Integrity trumps ability every time.

Integrity is the cream that always rises to the top. Integrity trumps ability every time. There is no limit to how far anyone can

go if others know they can always be trusted to do the right thing. Daniel was not promoted because of his temporal seniority, but because of his moral superiority. His character was a cut above everybody else's, and his integrity got him in deep trouble.

At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent (Daniel 6:4).

Evidently, a good-old-boy network had been skimming off the top, and they didn't want Daniel messing up their game. They also knew that Daniel was an outsider, a foreigner, an immigrant, and a Jew, and they couldn't stand the thought of him being over them. So, they launched a full-scale investigation into his life. They put a tail on him, hired private investigators, bugged his telephone, analyzed his tax records, and examined his bank statements. They interviewed people who went to high school and college with him. What did they find? Nothing, nada, zero, zip.

They brought in the FBI, the CIA, the IRS, and ordered them to turn over every rock, look under every bed, open every drawer and every closet, but they couldn't lay a glove on him. They thought surely after seventy years of working in the government something could cut Daniel down to size. But after putting him under the microscope, all they saw was an honest, hardworking, and holy man.

How did this exhaustive investigation end?

Finally these men said, "We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God" (Daniel 6:5).

What a testimony to say about someone: that you will never find anything legally, morally, ethically wrong with them and that your

only hope is to make them disobey God! When you live with integrity, your life becomes surrounded with a force field of righteousness and goodness that can withstand any investigation or accusation.

Count the Cost of Integrity

You are free to exercise integrity, but integrity is never free to exercise. If you know the story of Daniel, this wasn't the first challenge to his integrity, but this would prove to potentially cost the most.

So these administrators and satraps went as a group to the king and said: "May King Darius live forever! The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or human being during the next thirty days, except to you, Your Majesty, shall be thrown into the lions' den. Now, Your Majesty, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered—in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed" (Daniel 6:6-8).

Give these men credit for a brilliant idea. They had just checkmated Daniel. Since they could not find anything immoral or unethical about Daniel, they decided to make his faith illegal. Daniel didn't hide that he prayed three times a day and that he prayed to the only God who exists. They passed this law with only Daniel in mind, because they knew if they made prayer to Daniel's God illegal, he would have a gold-plated printed reservation to the lions' den.

How could they be so sure it would work? How did they know what Daniel would do? Because they knew Daniel. For seven decades, when it came to integrity, Daniel's report card was nothing but straight *As*. Every test was graded *100*. They knew Daniel wouldn't fold. They knew Daniel would die first. They understood how Daniel made every decision in his life.

Theodore Hesburgh, former president of the University of Notre Dame, said, “My basic principle is you don’t make decisions because they are easy; you don’t make them because they are cheap; you don’t make them because they are popular; you make them because they’re right.”⁹ Though the king thought Daniel had been involved in the decision, these men had lied. Daniel knew nothing about it. So we read, “Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published...” (Daniel 6:10).

The rubber had just hit the road in Daniel’s faith. He had offered a lifetime of honesty, decency, and godly integrity in government service. He had served faithfully and loyally under every king. He had always done what was best for others. What did he get for it? A gold watch? Stock options? A lifelong pension? A severance package? No.

Now he is facing the loss of his position, his security, his income, his friends, and even his own life. I will say it again. You are free to exercise integrity, but exercising integrity is costly. You exercise integrity not so you can get what you want to have or go where you want to go, but to be who you ought to be. Daniel was going to do whatever he did next with his eyes wide open, knowing full well the cost he may incur. He came through just like his enemies thought he would.

Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before (Daniel 6:10).

Nobody ordered Daniel to pray and nobody was going to order Daniel not to pray. Now let’s all ask this question: What would we have done?

You know Daniel had options. He could have played it safe and just quit praying for thirty days. He could have closed his windows and prayed in secret. He could have decided to take a month-long sabbatical and gone somewhere else. He could have lain in bed

at night and prayed silently. But integrity never goes on vacation. Integrity never takes a break. Integrity never calls a time-out. Integrity never takes a pass.

Integrity doesn't go with the flow. Integrity doesn't follow the crowd. Integrity stands its ground. Integrity doesn't listen to polls. Integrity lives for principles. Integrity may even leave you all alone because you are the only one charged, as was the case with Daniel.

Whenever you are told to stand down and instead you stand up, you will stand out and you may stand alone and then become a target. Talk is cheap. Integrity never just talks the talk, it walks the walk. It never veers off course. It never takes a shortcut. It never cuts corners. It stands tall. It stands tough and it stands true to what is right.

Pay the Price of Integrity

The traitors turn tattletales, run to the king, and box him in a corner.

Then they said to the king, "Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, Your Majesty, or to the decree you put in writing. He still prays three times a day." When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him.

Then the men went as a group to King Darius and said to him, "Remember, Your Majesty, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed."

So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" (Daniel 6:13-16).

Pretty high price to pay for a lifetime of integrity. It is not going to be quick like lethal injection or beheading or firing squad. A

lions' den death is not pretty. I was recently in Africa on a safari and I saw lions up close. They are terrifying! A lion's roar can be heard up to five miles away. It sounds like a giant bass speaker that vibrates through your whole body in order to strike a paralyzing fear into prey.¹⁰

They don't call him the king of the jungle for nothing. A hungry lion can eat 30 percent of his body weight in one sitting. That would be like an average person eating two hundred quarter-pound hamburgers for lunch. No man is a match for a lion because an average lion possesses the strength of fourteen men.¹¹

You have to feel for Daniel. After decades of faithfulness and godliness, you'd have to assume that this eighty-five-year-old man would not be going out this way. That is the price you pay for integrity because you never outgrow integrity and you never get too old to do what is right. Daniel pays the ultimate price of being thrown into the lions' den to face a horrific death.

Some of you are thinking, *Wait a minute. Daniel was delivered from the lions' den.* But imagine that you don't know how this story ends. After all, not everybody who gets thrown into a lions' den comes out alive. The only way you will ever maintain your integrity is when you make the same decision that Daniel made regardless of how the story ends for you. You've got to make it every day before you get out of bed and go to school or work. You must realize every day God is sending you out to lead others to know Christ and get closer to Christ, which takes integrity. Otherwise, you will lead people away from Christ. You've got to make up your mind that your integrity is more important than your safety, your security, your prosperity, your position, or your popularity.

The most important question you can ask to determine whether you're living with integrity is not "Did I do things right?" but "Did I do the right thing?" After every important decision or action, take a moment to ask yourself that question, and really devote time to sit with it.

A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed (Daniel 6:17).

Six hundred years later, a story eerily similar to this one took place.

He was thrown into a cave. A stone was rolled across the entrance with soldiers stationed there to protect it. Sound familiar? Another man faced death like Daniel, except he wasn't thrown into a lions' den; he was nailed to a cross. Daniel didn't know whether he would live or die, but this man knew he would die. We know, of course, that Daniel was delivered from death, but this man was delivered through death. Daniel didn't die—he came out alive; this man died—but he came back alive. His name was Jesus. Both faced what they faced because of their integrity.

Technically, Daniel was guilty because of his crime, but Jesus was declared guilty because of our crimes. Daniel was guilty because he broke human laws. Jesus was declared guilty because we broke God's laws. Because Jesus lived the life, counted the cost, and paid the price of integrity, we could be forgiven and receive eternal life.

You must consider the cost and pay the price for integrity. When you do the cost-benefit analysis, the benefits far outweigh the costs, because when you are a person of integrity you never have to fear accusations or investigations. People can go through your closets because there are no skeletons in them. Your life can be an open book because you have nothing to hide. So you live a life of integrity because when those times come that you are put under the microscope, all anybody will see is the light of integrity shining in your heart and the fire of purity burning in your soul.

All-In All the Time

You may not realize it, but your integrity is most likely tested in some way every day—from filling out an expense report to filling

out your income taxes, from kicking your golf ball back onto the fairway to cheating on your spouse. Whether you realize it or not, rare will be the day that somehow, somehow your integrity is not tested.

So first we need to *decide to be all-in on integrity every day in every way*. It is amazing how making just one major decision—that you will always do what is right, speak what is right, and stand up for what is right—will take care of all the other decisions.

Nobody can ever take your integrity away. They may steal your money, your job, your fame, your reputation, and even your life, but they cannot take your integrity. Only you can throw that away, so when it comes to your integrity, never give in, never give out, and, never give up.

Second, we need to *determine that our integrity is not for sale*. It may cost you your job; it may cost you your inheritance; it may cost you your freedom; it may cost you a friendship. But even if the price is your life, never take the sign off your integrity that says “Not for sale.”

Third, we must *dedicate ourselves to maintaining our integrity regardless of the cost*. If you do a cost-benefit analysis on integrity, the benefits far outweigh the costs. When you maintain your integrity, you don't have to spend time worrying that someone will uncover a lie about you. You don't have to worry that you will be caught doing something you will regret. You don't have to waste time trying to make up excuses or rationalize for a moral failure or ethical lapse. Integrity means you can mail your income tax return on April 15 and sleep like a baby.¹² In short, *integrity means being able to live with the most important person in your life with perfect peace and contentment—yourself*.

Jon M. Huntsman was an American businessman and philanthropist. He was the founder and executive chairman of Huntsman Corporation. He was negotiating a large business deal in 1986, and after lengthy negotiations with Emerson Kampen, chairman

and CEO of Great Lakes Chemical Corporation, they agreed that Kampen would purchase 40 percent of a division of his company for \$54 million. They reached across a table and shook hands settling the deal.

Huntsman did not hear from Kampen for several months, and approximately four months after their agreement, Great Lakes lawyers called to say they would like to draft some documents. Businesses often procrastinate and drag their feet, yet it took three more months for this simple purchase agreement to be put on paper. It had now been almost seven months since the handshake.

Within that period of time, the price of raw materials had decreased substantially and Huntsman's profits had tripled, but no agreement had been signed with Great Lakes and no documents had been exchanged. Kampen called Huntsman with a remarkable proposal.

"According to my bankers, 40 percent of Huntsman Chemical today is worth \$250 million. You and I shook hands and agreed on a \$54 million price almost seven months ago. I don't think I should have to pay the full difference, but I do think it is fair that I pay at least half." To Kampen's shock, Huntsman refused his offer. He said it would not be fair to use the appreciated value nor should they have to split the difference. He said, "You and I shook hands and made an agreement at \$54 million dollars and that is exactly the price for which our attorneys will draft the documents." Kampen said, "But that is not fair to you." Huntsman replied, "Emerson, you negotiate for your company and let me negotiate for mine." For John Huntsman, integrity was the trump card of his life, but the story doesn't end there.

Emerson Kampen never forgot that handshake. He took it with him to his grave. When Kampen died he had two principal speakers at his funeral: Governor Evan Bayh (who went on to become a United States senator) and Jon Huntsman. Though Huntsman and Kampen were not close friends, Huntsman suspected why he had

been asked to speak at Kampen's funeral. "Even though I could have forced Great Lakes to pay an extra \$200 million for that 40 percent ownership stake in my company," Huntsman said, "I've never had to wrestle with my conscience or to look over my shoulder. My word was my bond."¹³

Kampen never forgot that, and neither will others forget that about you. Integrity is the currency that others will always gladly honor and the exchange rate will always be most favorable.