

**Living the Life You REALLY Want: 1. The Integrity Question**  
**2 Chronicles 36:11-16; John 8:31-32**  
**May 30, 2021**  
**Pastor Steve Richards**

It was only a momentary distraction, but that decision came with immediate regret. On Thursday morning, I was in heavy traffic, and it was raining hard. Cars were moving slowly when something to my right caught my attention, and I looked to the right instead of straight ahead, assuming the car in front of me was still moving. It wasn't and a moment later, neither was I. And suddenly what I thought would be a good day became a day I'd rather not repeat. I might say the same for the young woman whose car sustained far more damage than mine. It was my decision, my action, my distraction – and my immediate regret.

It was my first accident, but it was not my first regret. I've had many of them through the years – a word, an action, or even an inaction without taking the time to consider my options or the consequences. This has been moving week for Amanda and me. After 21 years in the same house, I came across things that I had purchased through the years, because I really needed that item at the time. But once purchased it remained unopened for years. Or the pair of shoes I wanted but only came in a size smaller than I usually wear. I ordered them anyway, wore them a few times but my feet hurt too much when I wore them, because they were too small. The shoes remained in my closet for years, a constant reminder of a decision that only resulted in regret.

Life is all about decision-making. We make thousands of decisions every day. Researchers at Cornell University found that on average we make 226.7 decisions each day on just food alone. Of course, not all decisions are equal – some have long-lasting consequences. Relationships and the decision to marry. An employment change, a significant purchase, the decision to retire and the decision not to set aside funds for that retirement. My guess is that there are a few decisions you'd like to be able to go back and unmake – or at least listen to the advice that you were given but chose to ignore.

Decision-making is complicated. Our emotions can get in the way, and so do our appetites – otherwise no one would have to remind us to exercise and eat well. We know better than we do! Which is why we say to our kids: do as I say and not as I do. But knowing the right things to do does not guarantee anything. Everyone who marries wants happiness, and a failed marriage is not one bad decision but a whole string of them. Nobody decides to raise irresponsible children who will never leave home, but we've all observed parenting that we thought was problematic. No one decides to be up to their eyeballs in debt. It is the result of one bad decision after another. Nobody plans to make bad decisions, but too many people don't plan not to.

What if you had a list of questions you could ask yourself when faced with important decisions. When my Dad was living there were times I would ask him what I should do, and I cannot think of a single time when he told me what to do – instead he asked questions and in the process of asking the questions I gained a clarity about what to do that kept me from a decision that I would regret. That's this series. We will consider five questions to ask every time you make a decision of consequence. There's a theme verse around which this series is built that I hope you will memorize: **The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty. (Proverbs 17:12)** The prudent – that is the wise, the sensible ones – they see what's ahead and get ready, but the simple – that is the foolish or the irresponsible ones – just keep going and suffer the consequences. Let's say it together: **The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty.**

Five questions to ask when we are faced with an important decision. The first one is the Integrity Question: **Am I being honest with myself...REALLY?** Because the easiest person to deceive is the person in the mirror! You talked yourself into every bad decision you made. There may have been other voices and other factors that influenced your decision, but you made the decision.

The 17<sup>th</sup> Century English philosopher, Francis Bacon, said this: **The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion... draws all things else to support and agree with it.** Once we decide what to do or what we want, we become a magnet for all we want to do. You saw an ad and decided you wanted one of those and immediately you began listing all the reasons you need it. **And though there be a greater number and weight of instances to be found on the other side, yet these it either neglects or despises, or else by some distinction sets aside or rejects.** This is the 17<sup>th</sup> century way of describing the Confirmation Bias. We are drawn to anything that already confirms what we want and what we want to do, and we set aside and reject anything to the contrary.

Think back to a bad relationship decision or employment decision. You were warned, and it wasn't that you didn't listen, you couldn't listen. Or a bad purchase decision. It's clear now that you should not have bought it, but then – in the moment Francis Bacon was right. Once we have already made up our mind, we only seek out what confirms the decision we've already made. It's why you block people on Facebook. It's why you chose or chose not to be a vaccination. It's why we listen to the voices that only confirm what we see in the mirror.

2500 years before Francis Bacon, a Judean advisor turned prophet made a similar observation. Around the year 600 BC, Jeremiah served as an advisor to a series of Judean kings whose lives would have gone better and lasted longer had they taken Jeremiah's advice. But if you are the king, you don't have to take anyone's advice – and they didn't. Judah was the southern part of what we know as Israel, and Jeremiah first advised **King Jehoiakim** who was a teenager when he became king. Judah had been paying an annual tax to the much larger kingdom of Babylon, and in return Babylon provided military support and mostly allowed Judah to exist. After three years of paying the tax, King Jehoiakim decided to stop paying the tax – and instead declared loyalty to Babylon's arch-rival Egypt. When Jeremiah heard what the king was doing, Jeremiah begged the king to reconsider. This wasn't just a bad decision but a dangerous one. Babylon's army had just lost a major battle with Egypt, and Jeremiah assumed Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, would take out his anger on the Judeans. Furthermore, Jeremiah told Jehoiakim that this decision to switch loyalty to Egypt was contrary to God's will for the nation.

But Jehoiakim was the king, and he didn't need advice. He had already turned away from God – and he had no interest in a godly way of life. In fact, Jehoiakim considered himself to be God. And what happened? Exactly as Jeremiah predicted, Nebuchadnezzar came to Jerusalem, looking for the tax. His army laid siege to Jerusalem for three months before entering the city. Jehoiakim was put in chains and taken back to Babylon and added to Nebuchadnezzar's king collection. Whenever Nebuchadnezzar conqueror a nation, he captured the king to add to his collection. Then on special occasions, the kings would be paraded before the people to prove just how powerful Nebuchadnezzar was. The kings would be in chains, walking with a hand on the shoulder of the king in front, because he had removed their eyes.

Before Nebuchadnezzar left Jerusalem, he placed **Jehoiakin** who was the king's son as the next king. But three months later Nebuchadnezzar changed his mind, returned to Jerusalem, and added Jehoiakin to his king collection. And in his place **Zedekiah**, his uncle was appointed

the next king. What Zedekiah didn't know, and no one knew was Zedekiah would be the last king of Judah. Why? Because like the kings before him, he would not listen to sound advice. The historian of the book of 2 Chronicles wrote: **He did what was evil in the LORD his God's eyes and didn't submit before the prophet Jeremiah, who spoke for the LORD.** He just wouldn't listen. Like many of us, once his mind was made up, he could not hear and would not embrace wise counsel. And Zedekiah did exactly what Jehoiakim did. Jeremiah pleads, "this will not end well – not for you the king or your family or the people of Judah." But Zedekiah was the king. Jeremiah even went into the streets announcing that Nebuchadnezzar was coming, and the best thing to do would be to open the gates and welcome him into the city. And when Zedekiah heard what Jeremiah was saying, he ordered Jeremiah be thrown into a dry cistern to get him to shut up.

And what happens? Just as Jeremiah predicted, Nebuchadnezzar showed up, surrounded the city and waited, while the people inside the city ran out of food and began dying. Zedekiah found Jeremiah and begged Jeremiah to ask God to save the city, and Jeremiah said, "it's too late for that." The fate of the city had already been sealed. Their only hope was to open the gates and beg Nebuchadnezzar for mercy. But Zedekiah knew there would be no mercy for Zedekiah, so he gathered his children and snuck out of the city – which was another bad decision, because he was easily captured, and then forced to watch as each child was butchered before his eyes. That would be the last thing Zedekiah ever saw, because like the kings before him, he was blinded, put in chains, and marched back to Babylon to join the king collection. (If you think the Bible is boring, you haven't read the book of 2 Chronicles.)

We hear this story and wonder – what were they thinking? They were so easily deceived as history repeated itself time after time. And Jeremiah said: **The heart is deceitful above all things** – our hearts, our desires are dangerous. The heart falls for something or someone and sends a message to the brain: "I want this. Go figure out a way to justify it." And the brain says: "You need this. You can't live without it." And once we are convinced, it is so easy to sell ourselves. But if we are honest with ourselves, we know. We are deceived by our own desires. **and beyond cure. Who can understand it?** I can't, because I know better and I still deceive myself. Haven't we all said, "I don't understand why I just did what I did." Why did I do it, because I decided. That's why the Integrity Question is so important. Are you being honest with yourself...REALLY? The sooner we embrace this question, the sooner we will be ready to accept advice that runs counter to what we've already decided and where our hearts have taken us.

Jesus said to his followers: **The truth will set you free.** So this week, before you make a decision, stand in front of the mirror and ask: Am I being honest with myself...really? Being completely honest with yourself is freeing. It may not be easy, but the truth will set you free.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of May 30, 2021**

**Weekly Prayer:** Lord, we want to be worthy in a world that drags us down. We want to count ourselves among those who honor you with our lives. Help us, O Lord, to align our values so they are in line with yours. Help us make strides every day to become the ones who live with honor and integrity, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Monday, May 31

### Scripture: Psalm 15

Who can live in your tent, LORD? Who can dwell on your holy mountain? The person who lives free of blame, does what is right, and speaks the truth sincerely; who does no damage with their talk, does no harm to a friend, doesn't insult a neighbor; someone who despises those who act wickedly, but who honors those who honor the LORD; someone who keeps their promise even when it hurts; someone who doesn't lend money with interest, who won't accept a bribe against any innocent person. Whoever does these things will never stumble.

**Observation:** How does one have access to God? The Psalmist sees the Tent or the Sanctuary as the dwelling place of God. He describes how to live a holy life and thus have access to God. Removing the barriers in our lives and living with integrity makes us fully available to the presence of the living God.

**Application:** What word or phrase speaks to you from this passage? Integrity can be defined as your behavior matching your beliefs. Can you remember a time when your behavior matched your beliefs? How have you experienced the benefits of integrity?

**Prayer:** Almighty God, you have created the world and everything in it and yet you are not too large or too important to have time for me and my needs. Thank you that you do care for each one as if there were only one of us. Guide me in your ways that others may see you through me. Amen.

## Tuesday, June 1

### Scripture: Matthew 23:23-32

"How terrible it will be for you legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You give to God a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, but you forget about the more important matters of the Law: justice, peace, and faith. You ought to give a tenth but without forgetting about those more important matters. You blind guides! You filter out an ant but swallow a camel. "How terrible it will be for you legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and plate, but inside they are full of violence and pleasure seeking. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup so that the outside of the cup will be clean too. "How terrible it will be for you legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs. They look beautiful on the outside. But inside they are full of dead bones and all kinds of filth. In the same way you look righteous to people. But inside you are full of pretense and rebellion. "How terrible it will be for you legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. You say, 'If we had lived in our ancestors' days, we wouldn't have joined them in killing the prophets.' You testify against yourselves that you are children of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead, complete what your ancestors did.

**Observation:** The opposite of integrity is hypocrisy. In this passage we see Jesus strongly chastise the Pharisees for their hypocrisy. The Pharisees are so focused on the minutiae of the laws that they are not seeing the greater good that they could be doing.

**Application:** Hypocrisy is claiming to have standards and beliefs to which one's own behavior does not conform. Why is it important to avoid being a hypocrite? How have you observed hypocrisy in others? What impact did that have on you?

**Prayer:** Merciful God, help me to see in me what I am not seeing. Bring people into my life who can draw me closer to you. Help me to be that sort of person to someone else. Remove any hypocrisy from me and lead me in word and action toward integrity. Amen.

### **Wednesday, June 2**

**Scripture: Job 27:5-6**

I will not agree that you are right. Until my dying day, I won't give up my integrity. I will insist on my innocence, never surrendering it; my conscience will never blame me for what I have done.

**Observation:** Through no fault of his own, Job experiences one calamity after another. His friends, initially supportive, offer explanations that Job must be sinful and God must be vindictive. Job, however, refused to accept their advice and instead affirms his innocence and integrity.

**Application:** Being a person of integrity is not easy, and it is not always clear what is the right thing to do. Can you think of a time when you did the right thing even when all of the encouragement was to do the opposite? What did you draw upon to help you choose what is right?

**Prayer:** Draw me close, O God, and help me to find refuge and strength in your abiding Spirit. On those days when it feels like everyone and everything is against me, remind me that you have not let go of me and will guide me. Amen.

### **Thursday, June 3**

**Scripture: Matthew 5:37**

Let your *yes* mean yes, and your *no* mean no. Anything more than this comes from the evil one.

**Observation:** The Old Testament law provided for oaths (a promise or commitment) made in the name of God or appealing to God, but Jesus would do away with all oaths, in favor of always speaking the truth. It is a matter of character.

**Application:** Can your word be trusted? Jesus is encouraging you to maintain your integrity. How much is your integrity worth to you? What can you do today to develop the forgotten virtue of integrity?

**Prayer:** Lord God, thank you that we can always count on your promise to remain with us and be a source of strength throughout our lives. Your promise is absolute. Help me to remain true to the promises that I have made to others and to you. Give me wisdom and strength. Amen.

### **Friday, June 4**

**Scripture: 1 Kings 9:4-10**

As for you, if you walk before me just as your father David did, with complete dedication and honesty, and if you do all that I have commanded, and keep my regulations and case laws, then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, just as I promised your father David, 'You will never fail to have a successor on the throne of Israel.' However, if you or your sons turn away from following me and don't observe the commands and regulations that I gave you, and go to serve other gods, and worship them, then I will remove Israel from the land I gave them and I will reject the temple that I dedicated for my name. Israel will become a joke, insulted by

everyone. Everyone who passes by this temple, so lofty now, will be shocked and will whistle, wondering, Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and this temple? The answer will come: Because they deserted the LORD their God, who brought their ancestors out of Egypt's land. They embraced other gods, worshipping and serving them. That is why the LORD brought all this disaster on them."

It took twenty years for Solomon to build the two structures, the LORD's temple and the royal palace.

**Observation:** The Lord reemphasizes to Solomon the importance of obedience to the covenant in order to experience its blessings. The Lord promises to do what the Lord had promised to do. Promises made will be fulfilled. That's integrity.

**Application:** Over time, we forget, we chase after other things, and what was promised is not fulfilled. Integrity means we follow through on the promise made. When have you not acted with integrity? How would you act differently today?

**Prayer:** Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. (Psalm 51:10,12)

### **Saturday, June 5**

#### **Scripture: 2 Corinthians 1:12**

We have conducted ourselves with godly sincerity and pure motives in the world, and especially toward you. This is why we are confident, and our conscience confirms this. We didn't act with human wisdom but we relied on the grace of God.

**Observation:** Paul is no longer in Corinth, but his character has come under attack. He defends his trustworthiness against the untruths spoken about him. He asks the people in the church of Corinth to remember what they know about him and what they experience when he lived among them for 18 months.

**Application:** Have you observed integrity in others? If so, take the time to let someone know how their integrity has impacted you. Talk with this person about how to better maintain integrity in your own life.

**Prayer:** Loving God, I am grateful for all that ways that you are at work in my life and in the people and places around me. In whatever I do today, whether in word or deed, help me to do it all in the name of Jesus, while giving thanks and praise to you. Amen.