

Before I Die, I Want... 5. To Leave a Legacy

Luke 12:1-3; 2 Corinthians 1:12-14

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Pastor Steve Richards

When I was in the ninth grade, my family moved into a house just three doors from the high school. So I began the practice of going home for lunch every day. Sometimes my mother was there and would make something for me, but usually I was on my own with something that was left in the refrigerator from the night before. In the four years that I made this lunchtime trip from school to our house, there is one day that I remember above all the rest. It was the spring of my junior year, and as I entered the house and walked to the kitchen, both mom and dad were waiting for me. It became one of those defining moments in my life.

That morning during choir, I made a few comments – well, more than a few. I'm not really at liberty to tell you exactly what I said, but each time I said it, I got a response from those sitting around me. So, I said it again, and few more responded. I don't really know why I was doing what I was doing. This was my favorite class and my favorite teacher, but it began to feel like I was the one controlling the class. My comments from the back row made it impossible for Mr. Harder to accomplish anything he wanted that day. Until suddenly, he called me out of the back row and to walk with him to Mr Hollingsworth's office. He was the principal. I sat and waited in the outer office as Mr Harder spoke to Mr Hollingsworth, and then it was my turn in front of the principal. He asked me to describe what I had done and what was wrong with my behavior. I must have given the right answers because he told me to never do it again. And that was that. I was sent to my next class, feeling like Mr Hollingsworth and I had an understanding and a secret. So at noon as I left the building to go home for lunch, I remember thinking what a great day it was. I had taken control of a class, raising my esteem in the eyes of my friends, and I'd gotten away with it. Life was good.

But there in the kitchen were mom and dad. Never had both of them been at home when I came for lunch. Never. Dad told me to sit down, and I remember his words as if I had heard them this morning: "That is not who you are." No explanation was necessary. I knew exactly what he was referring to. "That is not who you are. You are better than that." It was then and still is a defining moment for me. That is not who you are. You are better than that. As I walked back to school, it was as if God himself was speaking those words into my heart. That is not who you are. You are better than that.

This is the fifth and final week in a series in which I invited us to think about what we would put on a Bucket List – if God were creating that bucket list. For me, these are the top five: 1) to know my why – to find a purpose greater than myself; 2) to have deep, meaningful relationships – Proverbs 13:20 - *Walk with the wise and become wise; a companion of fools suffers harm.* 3) experience true forgiveness – every one of us have hurt someone – every one of us have been hurt by someone – it's time for true forgiveness; 4) live fully as a disciple – to go anywhere and invite and welcome others – to be the visible presence of Christ's love in this world; 5) and today, Before I die, I want to leave a legacy. What would God want me to leave in this world?

Sometimes we are waiting on God's plan for us in our future, some grand design where our gifts and abilities will be perfectly matched with some great calling that will change the direction of our lives. And that very well may happen. Some of us may need to stop and change directions because we've been ignoring a greater calling. But I'm convinced that's not most of us. Our greatest work is right where we are. Wherever you are and wherever you go today, you are God's hands and feet in this world. And that's an incredible privilege to be working for the

Creator of the Universe. But it is also the kind of responsibility that can keep us from letting anyone know our true identity. It's like the sign that I've seen on some vehicles. (Problem with my driving? Cal 1-800-xxx-xxxx) I don't know that I'd want to drive that truck. Everyone is watching! Well, everyone is watching, and the Creator of the Universe needs us, because that's how the world will know.

We are not who others say we are. We are not even who we say we are. In the words of my Dad: "That is not who are you. You are better than that." You are who God says you are. We are creating a legacy. There's another word that I'd like us to consider this morning – INTEGRITY. Integrity means that all parts are working together – our words, our beliefs, our actions – they match. Our world today is filled with examples where that's not what we see. Stories of people who lack integrity are all too common. Some public figure – could be an athlete, a politician, even a Christian leader – who says one thing and then it makes the news that he or she has been involved in some questionable or illegal behavior. Or maybe it's someone you know with Christian beliefs but words and actions that just don't match. Jesus had a word for this: Hypocrite. Among his harshest words in the New Testament were those directed toward persons who failed to be who they claimed to be. **Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!** (Matthew 23:13)

The word, hypocrite, comes from a Greek word that was commonly associated with the theater. It was another word for actors. In the first century, one of the great theaters of the day was built in a town called Sepphoris. Here's a photo of what it looks like today. It seated between 3000-4000 people, and it was less than an hour's walk from a tiny little village called Nazareth. Scholars think that it was likely that a craftsman from Nazareth by the name of Joseph and his young apprentice son, Jesus, would have found work helping to build the projects going on in Sepphoris. From an early age, Jesus was familiar with the stage and the hypocrites – that is, actors. Later, Jesus would criticize the religious leaders, calling them hypocrites. He used a word that would carry a vivid image of actors playing a role on stage that wasn't really who they were. The idea is that there is a public me that's visible to everybody. Then there is a private me that's not visible to the rest of the world. In fact, I may not even realize the depths of private me because this has to do with my heart, which is known fully only to God. This matters.

The word, hypocrite, appears 17 times in the New Testament and every time it is used, it is by Jesus to address the moral character, the lack of integrity. According to literary records, the understanding that we have today of hypocrite originated with Jesus. And what Jesus thought of hypocrites was painfully clear. **Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.** And the yeast is the problem – little acts, snide comments, the rolling of eyes – it starts small. Remember it took Bernie Madoff a lot of years to take other people's money and try to cover his tracks. If I had stopped with my first comment that spring day of my junior year, it would not have caused the damage that it did. But that first comment led to another and another and another and then the damage was done. *Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.* Today, the word, Pharisee has become a caricature. We often think they had problems that we don't, but the reality is they were the most admired spiritual leaders of their time. In other words, Jesus is talking about a condition that anyone who takes faith in God seriously is susceptible to. Jesus knew this would be a problem – just look at Judas. So when we read these words, we are not exempt. We can't pretend the Pharisees are the bad guys and we are the good guys.

Listen to what Jesus said: **There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight,**

and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the roofs. If the public me and the private me are not the same me, I'm a hypocrite. And for those who follow Jesus, what I hear is this: That is not who you are. You are better than that. You are who God says you are – a person of integrity.

I remember watching an interview on 60 Minutes with Jessica Buchanan that was so compelling that I downloaded her book to read the complete story. The book is titled *Impossible Odds*, which was precisely what she faced. In October 2011 she was kidnapped while working in Somalia for an organization that teaches children how to recognize and avoid land mines. For the next 93 days she was terrorized by two dozen bandits, kept out in the open and on a starvation diet while her health steadily declined. Negotiations for her release went nowhere. And as the ordeal stretched into a fourth month, her captors increasingly impatient and her health at a crisis point, President Obama ordered a rescue operation by a team of 24 Navy SEALs. On January 25, 2012, the team of Navy SEALs parachuted into the camp where she was held, rescued Jessica and another hostage, killing all of the kidnappers before they even realized what was happening.

That's the story I heard on 60 Minutes. But the book includes another story with seemingly impossible odds. It is the story of her husband, Erik Landemalm. Erik was a lawyer, born in Sweden, and working in Somalia to process applications for asylum. Erik and Jessica came from two different worlds. Jessica grew up in a Christian family in Ohio, where faith and church participation was the foundation for everything else in life. Erik grew up in Sweden in a family where he received a strong ethical foundation, but the Christian faith was non-existent. And if he had any thought about the Christian faith, it was how it seemed completely unnecessary – and he could point out all of the inconsistencies between the beliefs and the practices of Christians he had known. Until he met Jessica's father. There was something very compelling about his reliance on faith. There seemed to be no inconsistencies between his faith and the way he lived his life. For Erik, Jessica's father, was the kind of example of Christian integrity that Erik had never experienced. And when Jessica was kidnapped, Erik found in her father an example that led him to prayer. In the book, he describes prayer as an unseen force that he believes was working to keep both Jessica and himself strong and confident. He said, he understood all the arguments against Christianity and yet he experienced the power of prayer in the lives of so many Christians. And it led him to write at the end of the book, *God is love. Impossible Odds, perhaps* – but he gained a new identity as he got close to a person of integrity.

It is what our world needs desperately. Could that be your legacy? Here's what Paul wrote to the Corinthians: ***Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace.*** We have an identity. It's called integrity – and it's when the source of our living is not worldly wisdom but the grace of God. So where are you? If you are reading your Bible but yelling at your spouse and kids – that's not who you are, you are better than that. If you are praying and participating in service projects, but cheating on an exam, making a personal expense look like a business expense, or exaggerating stories to get more attention – that's not who you are, you are better than that. If Public me looks different from private me, it's time to set things right, and be the person that God says you are. It's about getting so close to Christ and living there that even when the odds seem impossible we have the new identity. It's called Integrity. And Before I die, that's the legacy I want to leave behind.

Grow, Pray Study for the Week of May 30-June 4, 2022

Weekly Prayer: Bless us, O Lord, as we seek to be worthy in a challenging world. We want to leave a legacy. We want our lives to count for something significant. Grant us the strength and the courage so we can live lives that are just and honorable. Amen.

Monday, May 30

Scripture: Proverbs 11:3

Integrity guides the virtuous, but dishonesty ruins the treacherous.

Observation: The writer describes lives lived by contrary inner principles: integrity (your behavior matches your beliefs) and duplicity (behavior meant to trick). These principles build character over time. We are what we repeatedly do.

Application: Consider the segments of our society that are being destroyed by the duplicity of leaders, even entire organizations, who claim to believe one thing, yet practice something else. When have you experienced duplicity? How does integrity guide you?

Prayer: Dear Lord, this is a challenging world with people who often seem genuine in their motives and turn out to be just the opposite. Help me to be discerning. Give me the courage of my convictions to be a person of integrity each day. Amen.

Tuesday, May 31

Scripture: 1 Samuel 12:1-4

Samuel said to all Israel: "Listen: I have done everything you asked of me and have placed a king over you. The king will lead you now. I am old and gray, though my sons are still with you, and I've been your leader since I was young until now. So I'm here: Tell the truth about me in the presence of the LORD and his anointed. Have I ever stolen someone's ox? Have I ever taken someone's donkey? Have I ever oppressed or mistreated anyone? Have I ever taken bribes from someone and looked the other way about something? Tell me the truth. I will make it right." "You haven't oppressed or mistreated us, and you've never taken anything from anyone," the people answered.

Observation: When the prophet Samuel presents the newly inaugurated King Saul to the people, he seeks to establish publicly his own past faithfulness to the covenant as leader of the nation. His purpose is to exonerate himself and provide an example for Saul in his new responsibilities.

Application: Samuel has not used his position for personal gain. When have you observed the action of one person to be an influence and example for others? When have your actions influenced others? Quite often our actions speak far louder than our words.

Prayer: I give thanks, O Lord, for all those persons in scripture, in history, and throughout my life who have shown me how to be faithful and to respond with integrity in challenging situations. Let my life be a reflection of my trust in you and your will. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Wednesday, June 1

Scripture: Psalm 15:1-5

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: In this psalm, attributed to King David, we see a picture of what integrity looks like. David himself was not always a person of integrity. He lied and then committed murder in an effort to cover up his act of adultery. Not that his deception and sinfulness were forgotten when he finally confessed and sought forgiveness, but he was given a fresh start and greater understanding of a life of integrity. And, in the end, that's why we remember his legacy.

Application: The psalm suggests ways to find security and well-being: loyalty to God. Take a few moments to make a list of the actions that will keep us close to God. Are you challenged by anything listed here?

Prayer: Lord God, you have shown your preferred way for me to live. Help my words and beliefs to be matched by my actions. I want to live close to you. Keep me secure in the knowledge that you want what is best. May others see in me what it means to live close to your will. Amen.

Thursday, June 2

Scripture: Matthew 23:25-28

"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."

Observation: Jesus was relentless in condemning the religious leaders of his day, while openly welcoming sinners. He often called the most religious hypocrites. The Pharisees established laws in order to keep laws until there were so many laws that it was impossible to keep them all. Even the Pharisees could not live up to the letter of the laws that they demanded of others.

Their focus on laws gave them a purpose – overlooking what others were failing to do. But their focus overlooked what God wanted most.

Application: Hypocrite is a Greek word meaning “actor.” All of us have had moments when we acted in ways that were not a true reflection of who we want to be and who God wants us to be. How can we remove the mask and be honest with ourselves and with God? Ask God to help you live with integrity.

Prayer: You know, Lord, who I really am and what motivations truly direct my actions. I want to follow you, but my words and action do not always honor you. I am truly sorry. Forgive me, and help me to know what is right and then live that way. Let others see in me what it looks like to be your disciple. Amen.

Friday, June 3

Scripture: Matthew 5:33-37

“Again you have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago: *Don’t make a false solemn pledge, but you should follow through on what you have pledged to the Lord.* But I say to you that you must not pledge at all. You must not pledge by heaven, because it’s God’s throne. You must not pledge by the earth, because it’s God’s footstool. You must not pledge by Jerusalem, because it’s the city of the great king. And you must not pledge by your head, because you can’t turn one hair white or black. Let your *yes* mean yes, and your *no* mean no. Anything more than this comes from the evil one.”

Observation: The Old Testament allowed oaths with the exception of those that profaned the name of God. Jesus would do away with all oaths, in favor of always speaking the truth. Imagine a world where one’s word was enough, because everyone could be trusted and would always speak the truth. That’s the Kingdom of God!

Application: How practical is Jesus’ teaching for today? The Message interprets verse 37: *Just say ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong.* When have you said yes but then tried to “manipulate” your yes into a no?

Prayer: Thank you, God, for loving me. Thank you that you are always present. I know you will always keep your promises to me. Sometimes I’m more concerned with how I look to others. Help me to have a heart that is fully devoted to you and your ways. Amen.

Saturday, June 4

Scripture: Ezekiel 11:19-20

I will give them a single heart, and I will put a new spirit in them. I will remove the stony hearts from their bodies and give them hearts of flesh so that they may follow my regulations and carefully observe my case laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.

Observation: The prophet Ezekiel was living in exile in Babylon. Jerusalem was under attack by the Babylonians. Ezekiel announced that Jerusalem would fall as a result of the people’s sinful ways. These verses are part of a vision that Ezekiel receives in which God promises to restore those in exile who have remained faithful.

Application: Integrity is the kind of heart God promises to give us when we surrender ourselves to God. In place of a “heart of stone,” we are given a “heart of flesh.” This new heart will be

undivided – belief and actions completely consistent with God’s ways. If you experienced an undivided heart, what changes would you hope to experience?

Prayer: God, to the degree that I am able, I surrender my heart to you. I claim the promise that you are always at work in me and that you will give me the power and the desire to live for you this and every day. Amen.