Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

In Defense Of Integrity
Scripture: 2 Corinthians
Code: A367

1

—

John F. MacArthur, Jr.

By John MacArthur

Adapted from: *Master's Seminary Journal Volume8*

Spurgeon's defense of the truth and concern for integrity follow the pattern set by Paul in dealing with his opponents in Corinth. In 2 Corinthians, Paul's response to criticism consisted of a defense of his integrity, without which his ministry would have been ineffective. He placed before his readers a number of reasons to reassure them of his integrity. They included his reverence for the Lord, his concern for the church, his devotion to the truth, his gratitude for Christ's love, his desire for righteousness, and his burden for the lost. In defending his integrity, he risked being called proud by his enemies, so he also displayed several marks of his humility: an unwillingness to compare oneself with others, a willingness to minister within limits, an unwillingness to take credit for others' labors, a willingness to seek only the Lord's glory, and an unwillingness to pursue anything but eternal commendation. Paul had right motives and he defended them for the right reasons, that is, to glorify God and to promote the truth of the gospel and Christ's church.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the gifted nineteenth-century London preacher, said this in one of his later sermons, "I feel that, if I could live a thousand lives, I would like to live them all for Christ, and I should even then feel that they were all too little a return for His great love to me"[2]

Spurgeon was a pastor and Christian leader who clearly loved the Lord and defended His cause with integrity. That fact never exhibited itself more clearly than during the late 1880s, just a few years before his death. That is when he was a central figure in a major British church struggle known as the Downgrade Controversy. This doctrinal debate began within the Protestant churches of England (most notably the Baptist Union) when Spurgeon could no longer refrain from criticizing the church's alarming departure from sound doctrine and practice. Many churches and their pastors, who previously had been firmly conservative and evangelical, became more tolerant of theories that undermined the authority of Scripture and its view of man. Spurgeon also observed a deviation from the great Reformation doctrines and the proper role played by God's sovereign grace in salvation.

From his pulpit and the pages of his magazine, *The Sword and the Trowel*, he courageously and consistently spoke out for the truth and urged average believers to resist false teaching and stand firm on the fundamentals of Christianity.

However, the tide of doctrinal declension among the churches in Charles Spurgeon's day continued, and his godly conscience constrained him to leave the Baptist Union. Shortly after his death in the 1890s, some of Spurgeon's supporters formed a new society called the Bible League to continue the battle for doctrinal purity and practical orthodoxy among evangelical churches. During the months of controversy, Spurgeon received harsh criticism from his opponents, but he never wavered from his defense of the truth. The following excerpt, preached during the Downgrade from a sermon entitled "Something Done for Jesus," reveals the true nature of Spurgeon's righteous motives and proper integrity:

We love our brethren for Jesus' sake, but He is the chief among ten thousand, and the altogether lovely. We could not live without Him. To enjoy His company is bliss to us: for Him to hide His face from us is our midnight of sorrow… . Oh, for the power to live, to die, to labour, to suffer as unto Him, and unto Him alone! … If a deed done for Christ should bring you into disesteem, and threaten to deprive you of usefulness, do it none the less. I count my own character, popularity, and usefulness to be as the small dust of the balance compared with fidelity to the Lord Jesus. It is the devil's logic which says, "You see I cannot come out and avow the truth because I have a sphere of usefulness which I hold by temporizing with what I fear may be false." O sirs, what have we to do with consequences? Let the heavens fall, but let the good man be obedient to his Master, and loyal to his truth. O man of God, be just and fear not! The consequences are with God, and not with thee. If thou hast done a good work unto Christ, though it should seem to thy poor bleared eyes as if great evil has come of it, yet hast thou done it, Christ has accepted it, and He will note it down, and in thy conscience He will smile thee His approval.[3]

Paul's Defense of His Integrity

Charles Spurgeon's defense of the truth and concern for integrity aligned with the legacy of the apostle Paul. Throughout his ministry, Paul faced opposition from those who hated the gospel and wanted to pervert its proclamation for their own purposes. Most of the opposition came from a group of false teachers in Corinth. They accused him of being incompetent, unsophisticated, unappealing, and impersonal. As a consequence, Paul was obliged, much against his normal preferences, to defend himself and his ministry. He did not seek to glorify himself,but he knew that he had to defend the gospel and the name of the Lord from those who sought to destroy the truth.

It soon became clear to the false teachers in Corinth that if they were going to redirect the Corinthian believers toward error and a false gospel, in addition to getting rich and gaining power and prestige, they would have to destroy Paul's integrity. Since he had established and taught the church at

Corinth, the false teachers would have to undermine the church's confidence in Paul if they were going to replace his teaching with their own.

If his opponents at Corinth could destroy his integrity, they could also do away with Paul's usefulness, fruitfulness, and ability to serve the Lord. Therefore Paul had to maintain his integrity. While he had acknowledged his own humility in ministry—"We have this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor 4:7)—he also understood the real issue at stake in defending his integrity: "that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves" (v. 7).

An essential goal for any spiritual leader is to gain people's trust through genuine integrity. Like Paul, a leader's conduct must be trustworthy and consistent with his words. But once a leader proves to be hypocritical in any area of ministry, no matter how seemingly insignificant, he loses everything he has labored for in ministry and sees his credibility destroyed. That is what Paul feared as he confronted the rumors and lies of the false teachers at Corinth.

Paul used his second letter to the Corinthians, and certain passages in particular, to defend his integrity to the church. Second Cor 5:11 begins one of those passages, where Paul says, "We persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences."[4] Paul wanted the church to understand and accept his sincerity in all things, as God had.

As Paul began this defense of his integrity, common sense dictated that he not expend any more time or energy in further self-promotion (2 Cor 5:12)—the Corinthians were already well aware of his consistent character and what he had done. Nevertheless, because of the insidious, persistent, and often vicious nature of his enemies' attacks, Paul outlined several reasons the Corinthians could look to for reassurance regarding his integrity.

Paul's Reverence for the Lord

The first reason Paul offered in defense of his integrity was his "fear of the Lord" (2 Cor 5:11). *Fear* in this context does not mean "being afraid," but "worship" and "reverence." A few Scriptures easily illustrate this:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding (Prov. 9:10).

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and, going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase (Acts 9:31).

Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor 7:1).

Having the fear of the Lord means holding God in such awe that a person is wholeheartedly motivated to pursue His holiness and His service. Without question, that was true of Paul. He was so committed to the glory of God that it grieved him even to consider the possibility of dishonoring the Lord's name. Paul's intense reverence for God was therefore a powerful incentive for him to convince others of his integrity.

People sometimes ask me what is most difficult about receiving false criticism. I tell them that what is deeply disturbing and disconcerting is that the unfair criticism can lead others to believe I am misrepresenting God. That is what upset Paul about the allegations from the false teachers at Corinth—he knew they were misrepresenting him to the Corinthian believers.

A reverential knowledge of God's greatness is what characterized Paul. How else could he make this powerful declaration about God's attributes: "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen" (1 Tim 1:17)?

Paul's life was summed up in the exhortation he gave to the Roman Christians: "Present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship" (Rom 12:1). His reverence for the Lord was complete, and he was grieved when enemies of the truth sought to undermine his integrity and threaten his ability to teach and preach. Paul therefore felt constrained to launch a defense of his integrity, not for his sake, but for God's.

Paul's Concern for the Church

Paul's concern for the church at Corinth was well established (cf. 1 Cor 1:10). And potential harm from false teachers had freshly aroused his interest in her spiritual welfare. He was concerned that the false teachers would eventually gain converts and more influence within the fellowship, leading to an ideological war between their faction and Paul and his supporters. That would shatter the unity of the church, which would yield other negative results such as a discredited leadership, stunted spiritual growth among church members, and a hindered outreach to the surrounding community.

Paul's response to this array of threats against the Corinthian church is instructive for all who strive for integrity. Rather than jumping into the rhetorical trenches and answering each criticism and lie of the false teachers, Paul took a wiser, more judicious approach: "We … are giving you an occasion to be proud of us, that you may have an answer for those who take pride in appearance, and not in heart" (2 Cor 5:12). The apostle knew that in spite of all the dangers to the church, it was not prudent to mount a personal defense directly before his foes.

Instead, Paul armed the people he ministered to so they might ably defend him and his integrity.

In the long run, that is a much sounder method to contend for truth and integrity with one's enemies rather than trying to answer each and every charge personally. As Paul discovered, one can go to his opponents repeatedly and present the best-reasoned, most balanced defense of the truth and his integrity, yet all they will do is twist what he has said and use it to tear him down some more.

A person is better off to let his friends be his defenders, because those who have something against him are not as likely to feel the same way toward his friends. The Corinthians certainly experienced Paul's consistent behavior and integrity, so they had no reason not to defend him.

So Paul appealed to the brethren in the Corinthian church because he was passionately concerned with their unity and growth. In the end he could leave the results of his efforts with God: "He who boasts, let him boast in the Lord. For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends" (2 Cor 10:17–18).

Paul's Devotion to the Truth

A few years ago I was invited to speak in a philosophy class at one of the state universities located near my home church in southern California. I began my remarks by saying, "I'm here to tell you about the truth you've been searching for all your life. It is all the truth you need to know."

My approach dumbfounded the students in the class. Students in those kinds of classes invariably spend the entire term considering various views of the truth, but never reach any conclusions. Quite likely they leave the course not ever expecting to find the truth. That is why I went against the conventional wisdom and expounded the truth of the gospel.

Whenever you are dogmatic, affirmative, and absolute in speaking the truth, as I was in that classroom, the world thinks you have lost your reason. That is how Paul's adversaries in Corinth characterized him. His passionate zeal and devotion to the truth became another reason for defending his integrity: "For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are of sound mind, it is for you." The Corinthian believers did not need to question Paul's reason—they came to Christ through his preaching, grew in their sanctification under his teaching, and, as a result, loved Paul and trusted in God. His sound mind was obvious to all. But the false teachers and their "converts," in their attempt to overthrow Paul's scriptural teachings with their own self-centered, erroneous ones, charged that Paul had lost control of his senses.

But the apostle made it abundantly clear that he and his fellow ministers were beside themselves for God (v. 13). The phrase "beside ourselves" refers to his passion and devotion to God's truth. The

term does not refer to a person who is clinically deranged, but it can describe someone, such as Paul, who is dogmatically committed to truth. And Paul could be more dogmatic than anyone else because he was dealing with direct revelation from the Lord.

Nevertheless, Paul's enemies insisted and persisted in labeling him a dogmatic extremist who was off balance mentally. But dogmatism has always had a negative connotation for the world, as the apostle discovered on other occasions. Notice what happened when Paul gave an earnest, straightforward presentation of the gospel before the Roman official, Festus:

"And so, having obtained help from God, I stand to this day testifying both to small and great, stating nothing but what the Prophets and Moses said was going to take place; that the Christ was to suffer, and that by reason of His resurrection from the dead He should be the first to proclaim light both to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles." And while Paul was saying this in his defense, Festus said in a loud voice, "Paul, you are out of your mind! Your great learning is driving you mad." But Paul said, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I utter words of sober truth" (Acts 26:22–24).

Once again the solid thread of integrity is evident in Paul's ministry. He was in complete control and possessed a sound, sober mind. Both at Caesarea before Festus and at the church in Corinth, Paul's message was passionate and zealous because the truth of the gospel was at stake. But he also knew how to be humble and well-reasoned so that people would receive and apply the truth. In the end the issue was the same—he defended his integrity so he could continue to proclaim God's truth unhindered.

Paul's Gratitude for Christ's Love

Another reason Paul was so concerned to defend his integrity was his thankfulness for the Savior's love for him. He told the Corinthians: "The love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died" (2 Cor 5:14). Paul defended his ministry and offered its richness to Christ as an act of gratitude.

To emphasize the strength of this motivation, Paul used the Greek word translated "controls." The simplest, clearest meaning of this word is "a pressure that causes action." The gratitude Paul had for Christ's love for him exerted great pressure on him to offer his life and ministry to the Lord. And the overriding factor for Paul was the Lord's substitutionary death and the application of that death to him. The essence of Christ's substitution is summarized well in Romans 5: "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (vv. 6–8).

The death of Christ is meaningless apart from an understanding of its substitutionary impact—if Christ didn't die in our place, then we would have to die for our sins, and that would result in eternal death.

That certainly should be motivation enough for all of us to strive for integrity in our ministries and all aspects of our lives. After all, everyone who died in Christ receives forever the saving benefits of His substitutionary death (cf. Rom 3:24–26; 6:8). That's the conclusion Paul is referring to in the second part of 2 Cor 5:14 when he says, "One died for all, therefore all died." The truth of our Lord's substitution is both a comfort and a motivation for thanksgiving, for Paul and for us: "I shall not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1:20–21).

Paul's Desire for Righteousness

The great eighteenth-century English hymn writer Isaac Watts composed the following stanzas about the pursuit of righteousness and obedience to God's Word:

Blest are the undefiled in heart, whose ways are right and clean, who never from the law depart, but fly from ev'ry sin.

Blest are the men who keep thy Word and practice thy commands; with their whole heart they seek the Lord, and serve thee with their hands.

Great is their peace who love thy law; how firm their souls abide! Nor can a bold temptation draw their steady feet aside.

Then shall my heart have inward joy, and keep my face from shame, when all thy statutes I obey, and honor all thy Name.

Those words, based on Psalm 119:1, could easily have been uttered by the apostle Paul as a way of declaring his all-out desire to live righteously. His desire flowed logically from his tremendous gratitude for Christ's love and was another reason Paul so vigorously defended his integrity to the Corinthians. Paul told them, "He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf" (2 Cor 5:5).

In defending his integrity, Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that his old, self-centered life was finished. Against all the distorted accusations from the false teachers, he wanted his brethren to be persuaded that his motives in ministry were completely pure. And Paul had a strong case because, by God's grace, he was without self-promotion, self-aggrandizement, pride, or greed as he labored to plant and nourish local churches among the people of Asia Minor.

The Corinthians should never have doubted Paul's integrity. He had already instructed them about the spiritual lifestyle they ought to adopt: "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor 10:31–11:1)

Paul's beliefs and motivations had not changed, no matter what his hypocritical opponents were accusing him of. He still lived for Christ and for the sake of righteousness, not for himself. Any other standard was unacceptable to him.

So Paul defended his integrity because he desired to live boldly for the Lord and did not want anyone to think his motivation in life was anything less than that. Paul's example should be an encouragement to all of us to cultivate and defend our integrity, because without it, we cannot minister effectively for the Lord.

Paul's Burden for the Lost

Paul was extremely passionate when it came to reaching the lost for Christ. Seeing people converted by the sovereign power of the gospel message was the ultimate reason for him to continue in ministry. Paul's burden for the lost therefore is the last of his reasons for defending his integrity.

Acts 17:16 illustrates the intensity of Paul's evangelistic burden:

Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was beholding the city full of idols. So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the market place every day with those who happened to be present.

Paul writes about his passion for the unsaved in Rom 1:13–16:

I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented thus far) in order that I might obtain some fruit [converts] among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to every one who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Later in his letter to the Roman believers, in perhaps the most telling statements he ever wrote about his burden for lost souls, Paul says,

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren [the Jews], my kinsmen according to the flesh… . Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them [the Jews] is for their salvation (Rom. 9:1–3; 10:1).

As he continued to defend his integrity to the Corinthians, Paul said, "Therefore from now on we recognize no man according to the flesh" (2 Cor 5:16). This connects back to verse 15 and simply means that, since his transformation in Christ, Paul no longer evaluated people by external, worldly standards. He had a new priority, and that was to meet the spiritual needs of the people of God.

Prior to our transformation we used to assess others by external criteria only—physical appearance, outward behavior, social and economic orientation, and engaging personality were our old yardsticks. But when a person comes to faith in Christ he begins to evaluate people by a new set of criteria. And the central issue we want to determine when we meet someone is: What is his relationship to God; does he know Christ?

Perhaps you have a neighbor who is kind and considerate, who helps you out often and is especially available when you have an illness or emergency. As is often the case, you develop a warm and friendly relationship with someone like that. But if you are honest, you can never be content in your friendship until you are sure he has a right relationship to God. In fact, the more you build your relationship with your neighbor or anyone else, the more burdened you become for his spiritual welfare.

Paul gives believers no option but to think of the unsaved and everything in life from a transformed perspective: "Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Cor 5:17). Paul had certainly experienced complete change in his life—from self-centered Pharisee to dedicated apostle of Christ—and he knew such transformation would happen to anyone who became a Christian.

Is it any wonder that Paul defended his integrity so ardently? If any of his enemies could destroy it, he would lose his credibility and influence in preaching the gospel and thus his entire reason for living. If only every Christian could have the same passion and purpose as the apostle Paul.

Paul Reveals His Humility

Time and again as Paul defended his integrity, he risked being labeled proud by the false teachers at Corinth. Yet such a designation could not have been more unfair or untrue. Paul had already, by the sovereign plan of God, distinguished himself as the most noble, most influential, most effective earthly servant the church had ever seen, apart from the Lord Jesus Himself. Yet undergirding all his

strong character qualities and various motives for defending his integrity was the all-important characteristic of humility.

Scripture demonstrates that Paul was aware of his weaknesses and shortcomings. In Rom 7:18 he says, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.” In 2 Cor 4:7 Paul describes himself in the lowliest of terms: “We have this treasure [the light of the gospel] in earthen vessels [garbage pails].” Finally, the apostle’s humble self-analysis is seen very clearly in what he wrote to Timothy: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all” (1 Tim 1:15).

No Christian virtue is more cherished than humility. Micah 6:8 says, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Humility is best defined as a true and genuine sense of conviction that one is utterly and completely unworthy of the goodness, mercy, and grace of God and incapable of anything of value apart from those divine gifts.

Paul culminates his defense of his integrity before the Corinthians with a thorough presentation of the marks of humility (2 Cor 10:12–18). In this passage he continues to contrast his pure motives and righteous goals in ministry with the impure motives and unholy agendas of the false teachers. Paul was certain his humility would be convincing proof to his readers of his true integrity.

An Unwillingness to Compare Oneself with Others

The first mark of humility for the godly teacher and leader is an unwillingness to compare himself with others and claim superiority over them. False teachers typically elevate themselves. But Paul had a different approach. He told the Corinthians, “We are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves” (2 Cor 10:12).

Those who invaded the Corinthian church with error used glib speech, a superior attitude, and a hypocritical front to appear better than everyone else, especially Paul. But he refused to lower himself to their childish, ego-centered games. In fact, he did not even consider such a strategy, saying, “To me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord” (1 Cor 4:3–4).

Paul was concerned only with comparing his credentials with God’s standards. He did not use man-centered criteria to boast of his successes. Instead, he was more inclined to boast of his suffering, such as the sadness, tears, imprisonment, pain, and persecution he endured—all for the love of Christ (cf. 2 Cor 11:23–31).

In contrast, those who are proud and without integrity will establish these standards for success: charm, flattering personality, authoritarian bearing, rhetorical skills, and mystical spiritual experiences. They invent the standards, measure themselves by them, and commend themselves for superior "success."

Paul's standards were objective and God-centered. The false teachers' standards were subjective and worldly. Based on that simple comparison, it is easy to determine what pattern one should follow in pursuit of genuine integrity.

A Willingness to Minister Within Limits

The humble servant of God will also have a willingness to minister within limits. That was not the attitude of Paul's opponents at Corinth. They overextended and overstated everything they did in an effort to widen their influence, enhance their prestige, and increase their fortune. They exaggerated everything so that they would look better than they actually were.

We do not know exactly what the false teachers told the Corinthian believers about their battle with Paul, but undoubtedly they portrayed themselves as more powerful, more sophisticated, more articulate, and more successful than him. And they had to lie to make that case.

How did Paul respond to those claims? Again he refused to engage in the same dishonest tactics of his enemies but simply told the Corinthians, "We will not boast beyond our measure, but within the measure of the sphere which God apportioned to us as a measure, to reach even as far as you" (2 Cor 10:13). Paul was concerned with only one thing: to portray accurately the reality of his ministry.

Paul always understood the principle of ministering within limits. He mentions it both at the beginning and the end of his letter to the Romans:

Through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name's sake (1:5).

Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed… . And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, that I might not build upon another man's foundation (15:17–18, 20).

Pride and overstatement were not characteristic of Paul. He spoke only of what Christ had done through him and supported his statements by objective, truthful evidence. God had sovereignly gifted Paul and given him a specific commission to fulfill. He was completely content to preach the gospel in the Gentile world and found churches and train leaders in those unreached regions. He did not need

to be more important than God intended him to be; he just wanted to be faithful to God's plan and carry it out with a depth of excellence that would please the Lord.

What is remarkable about Paul's pattern for ministry is that he simply followed Jesus' example. We often forget that Christ willingly functioned within the narrow limits His Father established.

First, Jesus' ministry was limited by God's will. In John 5:30, Jesus told the Jewish leaders, "I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me." Second, Jesus obeyed the Father's will according to His timetable only (Matt 26:45; Luke 22:14; John 2:4; 4:23; 5:25; 7:30; 17:1). Third, Jesus limited His ministry to God's people and to those who recognized their need for salvation (Matt 15:24; Luke 5:31–32). Fourth, Jesus limited His ministry by God's plan. He preached the gospel to a small group of people first (including the disciples) before extending it beyond the regions of Judea. Never did Christ allow Himself to get sidetracked onto other issues, and neither did Paul.

An Unwillingness to Take Credit for Others' Labors

Plagiarism has been a problem in the world for centuries. It is defined as "to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own." A truly humble person with real integrity will avoid plagiarism, and that was true of Paul. He never displayed a willingness to take credit for others' labors.

His deference for others contrasted with the false teachers' desire to take credit for things they had never achieved, such as their contributions to the spiritual progress of the Corinthian church. But Paul could confidently and accurately tell the Corinthians how God had used him in their lives:

We are not overextending ourselves, as if we did not reach to you, for we were the first to come even as far as you in the gospel of Christ; not boasting beyond our measure, that is, in other men's labors, but with the hope that as your faith grows, we shall be, within our sphere, enlarged even more by you, so as to preach the gospel even to the regions beyond you, and not to boast in what has been accomplished in the sphere of another (2 Cor 10:14–15).

Paul did not overstate or claim credit for what was not his. Nor did he flaunt authority that did not belong to him. He underscored what he had said previously: "I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth… . According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it" (1 Cor 3:6, 10).

Paul was determined to avoid the pride and dishonesty of those who "ministered" in a worldly fashion. He would not go to a place and tell lies about his alleged accomplishments. He would not go into a city and usurp the credit for ministry that belonged to another. Instead, Paul knew that those who truly

desired to further God's kingdom would do so through their own virtuous lives.

Romans 15:17–18 summarizes well Paul's attitude about this third aspect of humility: "Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed."

A Willingness to Seek only the Lord's Glory

A fourth way in which Paul exhibited the true humility of the man of integrity was by a willingness to seek only the Lord's glory. The mere thought of self-glory was utterly repulsive to Paul, whereas those who teach error are willing, for the sake of their own glory and pre-eminence, to tear up the church and tarnish the glory of Christ.

Paul had already laid out his position quite plainly in 1 Corinthians regarding why Christians should seek only God's glory:

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God … that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1:26–29, 31).

Paul here reminds all that if they boast, it must be only in the Lord, and if they seek anyone's glory, it must be only His (cf. Ps 115:1). That is the essence of humility—the recognition of one's basic unworthiness and the acceptance of no worthiness but God's.

An Unwillingness to Pursue Anything but Eternal Commendation

Authentic biblical humility is also revealed in Paul's unwillingness to pursue anything but eternal commendation. In 2 Cor 10:18 he says, "For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends."

False teachers commend themselves. But Paul desired God's approval, and he proved that he did not fabricate his own commendation. The Greek verb he used for "commends" in verse 18 literally means "to be tested" or "to be approved." That's what Paul meant when he said, "But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself" (1 Cor 4:3).

Paul was not concerned about what others thought of him; the only praise and commendation he desired was from the Lord. That is an important reminder for all of us as we pursue integrity: we will receive God's approval not as a result of our gifts, our skills, our personality, or our popularity, but because of our humility.

In summary, Paul possessed the power of integrity. His motives were pure (1 Cor 4:5), and he defended them for the right reasons—to glorify God and promote the truth of the gospel and Christ's church. Paul's humble defense of his integrity is, with the exception of the Lord Jesus Himself, the most outstanding and thoroughly detailed example of Christian integrity found in Scripture. Modeling Paul's integrity should be a goal for us all.

1 1. The source of this essay is the recently released volume entitled *The Power of Integrity* (Crossway, 1997). It is adapted and used here by permission.

2 2. Cited in Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), 20.

3 3. Cited in *The Forgotten Spurgeon*, 205–6. For a more complete discussion of the Downgrade Controversy and its significance for today's church, see Appendix 1 of my book *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1993), 197–225.

4 4. The New American Standard Bible is the source of all Scripture quotations in this article unless otherwise noted.

[1]The Master's Seminary. (1997; 2002). *Master's Seminary Journal Volume 8* (8:137-149). Master's Seminary.

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2014 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).