

“ A Seeker of Christian Character and Integrity”

Chapel Message

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Mount Vernon Nazarene University

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II Peter 1:5-9

Hebrews 12:3-12

Introduction

Several months ago, Dr. Jon Wallace, president of Azusa Pacific University in southern California, and a very close friend of mine, asked his Board Chair emeritus, noted author Dr. Ted Engstrom, some questions.

Dr. Jon had just asked Dr. Engstrom question number five, “ What do you want on your tombstone and how do you want the first line of your obituary to read?” Without hesitation and with evident joy dancing in his eyes, Dr. Engstrom replied, “I simply want my tombstone to say, ‘Here lies a man of integrity.’” He continued “. . . that’s because the greatest hallmark for a Christian is to be known as a person of integrity . . . a consistency between our personal and public lives.” A whole person. A complete person.

Integrity has been defined as honesty, consistency and coherence. The same inside as outside. It is the #1 trait people want in leaders. Honesty. Truthfulness.

Where does a university student begin a pursuit of truthfulness and honesty in the classroom and beyond? When in one’s life does the individual begin to express his or her basic faith with the Christian character qualities listed in II Peter 1: 5-9 and Ephesians 4:2:

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| * goodness | * humility |
| * spiritual understanding | * gentleness |
| * self control | * patience |
| * perseverance | * respect |
| * godliness | * peace-making |
| * brotherly kindness | * generous love |

“If you possess these qualities in increasing measure,” Peter admonishes, “they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your Christian life.”

Character counts. Character traits will drive your life! Living truthful, honest, consistent and coherent lives on campus and off, in the classroom, or resident halls, alone or with other persons, will characterize you at your best, and convict you at your worst. There is no character exemption for leaders . . . or followers; student, faculty or administrator.

Let me share with you some very personal reflections on my own spiritual journey in this lifelong pursuit to be a person “marked by integrity”, and the role of a Christian University in this pursuit.

Very early one September morning in 1960, a group of recent high school graduates from southeastern Florida departed from Ft. Lauderdale First Church of the Nazarene on a church bus for Nashville, Tennessee. It was a very long trip to Trevecca Nazarene College. Those were the days without interstate highways throughout Florida, Georgia, or Tennessee.

At Trevecca, I developed an insatiable lifelong desire to learn. My grades improved each quarter. I learned how to think and study. My years at Trevecca turned me around for which I am still profoundly grateful. And I was challenged to live a life of integrity. Personal integrity was expected. Academic dishonesty was unacceptable. I began in those undergraduate years a lifelong pursuit of Christian character development.

Something very significant happened to me spiritually in my sophomore year. I remember the date - January 17, 1962. Revival services were being held on campus. In some way, God gripped my heart through the singing and preaching. I remember going to my room following the service. I made a little altar out of a milk carton box. That night I was sanctified through and through. I came to the point of saying to God, "If I am going to be a Christian, I want to be the best Christian I can. I don't want to play games. I don't want to go halfway. Here's my life. Translate my testimony of faith to integrity in life. I want my words spoken and deeds done to flow from what I believe and affirm." From the depth of my heart, that night, and by the grace of God, I spoke a "forever yes!" to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A biblical passage came to me during this spiritual encounter that has truly been my life verse. "Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me will find it." (Matthew 16:25)

Anne and I were married in the summer of 1962! It seems like we were in graduate programs from the time of college graduation in 1964 until 1978 when I completed a doctoral program and Anne and I moved to the European Nazarene College near Shaffhausen, Switzerland. Then on to the Asia Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary in Manila, the Philippines for six years. And it's very hard to believe that we have now completed 15 years at MVNU.

As I look back upon my years as a Christian, I think I've learned a few things about a life-long pursuit of Christian character and integrity. Let me mention two:

Insight #1. I've learned that saying, "Yes, Lord," is really a once-and-for-all response with daily implications. I said it and I meant it for all eternity in 1962, but I've had to come back and say it again and again as new character and integrity issues have come across my path.

This prayer and response is just as real and personal today as it was in 1962 when, by God's grace, I first said "Yes, Lord" to Your will and to Your way.

When I really began to allow God to lead and guide me and I began to be responsive to His promptings in my life, His paths led me in ways that I could not even conceive when I said that simple, if not naive, "Yes, Lord." My life since that time has been increasingly

filled with meaning, purpose, fulfillment, significance, direction, and value. With profound gratitude to God, and humbly before God, I testify to you that my life has been increasingly “marked by integrity.” To God be the glory.

Christian integrity speaks of someone who has taken the principles that govern his or her life - the Holy Scriptures - and increasingly integrated them into every area of his or her life. Honesty, truthfulness, consistency and coherence increasingly define our words and deeds.

Remember Insight #1. “Yes, Lord,” is a once for all response to God with daily implications as new character and integrity issues come across my path.

Insight #2. Regarding this life-long pursuit of Christian character and integrity: God is more interested in my character than in my comfort.

Hebrews 12:5-12 tells us that God disciplines us in order to produce in our very lives the character qualities He identifies as important for his children. He desires to develop within us these Christian character qualities of truthfulness, humbleness, gentleness, loving kindness and peacemaking . . . in order to make us more effective in our calling. I have learned much from the Hebrews passage regarding the relationship between God’s discipline and Christian character development.

Consider this: God disciplines us to develop our character (reputation, quality of life, moral firmness) Why? Because He loves us and wants us to mature and develop in our Christian faith.

Comparison is made with an earthly father who trains us, doing the best he knows how. (Heb. 12:7-10, esp. v. 10) If God didn’t love and care for us, He wouldn’t bother to discipline us. God’s training and discipline of us is always right.

There are qualities in our lives that need building or strengthening, and without God’s discipline, we remain stunted in our growth in grace. Remember, God disciplines us to develop our character.

Character development is often painful. Parents of children often say, during periods of discipline, “I wish I did not have to do this but...” and “This hurts me more than it does you.” And, for us who receive the discipline, there is a tendency for us to say in the midst of hurt, “Why me?” and “What if?”

Slowly I have come to see that God permits people, circumstances and situations to cross our path to teach us lessons about ourselves that are often very painful. He sometimes uses teachers, roommates, colleagues and people who are very different from us to “teach” us lessons we need to learn about faith and life if we are to continue to grow and mature as Christians.

In these very painful encounters, circumstances or situations, we are forced to deal with some Christian character qualities that would never be developed without these “painful” experiences.

As painful as it is at times, God uses people, circumstances or situations to “knock the props from under us” and lead us back to complete faith / radical trust in Jesus as Lord.

God disciplines us to train and develop us! He disciplines us to develop our character; and character development is often painful.

As we accept His discipline, we grow in grace and Christian character. What emerges is a “quiet spirit” or a “right spirit.” Stated another way, God’s discipline in our lives produces growth in harmony with others, and growth in holiness of life. What can I learn? and how can I change? become “growth-producing” questions for the maturing Christian

Remember Insight #2. God is more interested in our character than in our comfort.

In conclusion, let me ask you the questions referenced at the beginning of the sermon. “What do you want on your tombstone, and how do you want the first line of your obituary to read?

My dad, who was an alcoholic, became a Christian on his deathbed, and I’m glad he did. But what a tragedy to lose his life for nothing and to waste his life and die basically with very little. What a tragedy!

To think, that God took the eldest child of this alcoholic and, in his undergraduate years at a Christian College, spoke an eternal “yes, Lord” to the Triune God. And as a result of that response, and the character shaping experiences in my life, I have experienced far more meaning, purpose, significance, and fulfillment than I every dreamed possible. And God is not finished with me yet. I am still on the journey. God continues to unfold His plan and will for my life with blessings and surprises I could have never anticipated. And I am still maturing in my Christian faith and developing in Christian character.

I want my life to be “marked by INTEGRITY.” Honesty, kindness, gentleness, compassion, peacemaker.

I pray that the MVNU values document, “For this We Stand,” will assist you in developing the foundation for the values on which you stand as a Christian. Read and reread it. I ask faculty members to discuss it in class. Discuss the document in your dorms or apartments. Help us strengthen the document so it becomes a university-wide reference for personal and community integrity. Academic dishonesty is wrong, and Christian character is right for the follower of Christ. Help us know how to communicate these essentials more clearly on this campus. Spend time in your devotional life this school year reading and rereading the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7.

Ghandi stated, “You must be the change you seek to produce in others.” That’s how I want to be remembered!

Don’t forget that, this life long growth process begins with radical trust in the Triune God who desires to cleanse your motives through and through. Increasingly, as you nurture and cultivate this “purity of heart,” you can become a person of intense Christian faith and character. You can be an individual “marked” by integrity who seeks to bring consistency between your personal and public life. Between what you believe and the ways you live. On campus. Off campus. By yourself. In a large group.

Several years ago I heard a person say “With some persons, their competencies will take them further than their character will permit the person to go.” This is why I encourage you to find your equivalent to my “milk box in the middle of the floor in my dorm room,” and pray . “If I am going to be a Christian, “Holy God,” I want to be the very best Christian I can be. No game playing with me. I don’t want to go half way. Here’s my life, may my words and deeds match my beliefs and faith.” Speak a “forever yes” to the Triune God. And you will begin a life-long journey of discovering the implications of “Losing one’s life for Christ and, in the process, truly finding life!”

Yes, Lord! To a lifelong pursuit of Christian character and integrity!” This is really Kingdom Ethics!

I deeply desire for each of you, and for me, that increasingly, these words will be a reality, a conviction, an anchor, the frame of reference in our lives.

May it be so, Lord, that every MVNU student will be “marked by integrity.” May it be so, Lord.

Amen.