



STEP 10: BE A PERSON OF INTEGRITY

There are special days for just about anything these days. One such day is International Honesty Day (30th April), created to encourage us to be more, well, honest.

And we might need it. According to a 2021 survey on tandem.net, less than half (48%) of people surveyed consider themselves honest. Politicians are considered the least trustworthy people globally (according to 57% of people), and apparently, it's easier to lie in a second language than your mother one (23%). The most popular lying topics are how much exercise you do (27%), dietary habits (23%) and sick-leave excuses (also at 23%). Mind you, 10% of people also claimed to have lied in surveys, so how much of this is reliable is somewhat questionable.

What does this show? That honesty is a struggle. More than that: that *integrity* is a struggle. What is integrity? It's where what you think, what you say, and what you do, all line up. Where you are a 'consistent' person.

In this chapter, we find the first reference to 'integrity' in our English Bibles. Only it's not our hero Abraham who demonstrates it – it's someone you wouldn't expect!

Genesis 20

What are we supposed to learn from this story? That little white lies are fine, so long as you've got a good reason?

No. The lesson is: if you're going to live a God-filled life, you've got to have integrity, or *be'tam le'vavi, uv'niq'yon kaphay* – 'wholeness of my heart, and cleanness of my hands', as vs5 puts it. I.e. you need to be more like Abimelech, less like Abraham! The same outside, as in.

So how do we do that? There are 3 lessons that Abraham has to learn in this chapter. 3 'need tos':

1) The Need To Build Good Habits. Abraham moves to what would later be the land of the Philistines, and there he makes the same mistake as he did in Egypt 25 years before: he tells a half-truth about Sarah. I.e. this is a lie he's been telling for a long time – all their married lives, in fact (vs13). How about that for a pre-nuptial agreement?!

Abimelech, on the other hand, is different – in spite of being a Canaanite king. The fact that God speaks to him (not to Abraham) and spares his life, and that Abimelech says to Abraham, "You have done things to me that ought not to be done" (vs9), indicates a pretty good moral compass. It indicates integrity, in fact.

The lesson is: old habits die hard – so build good ones! Don't be like a certain canine in a certain proverb: "As a dog returns to its vomit, so a fool repeats his folly" (Proverbs 26:11)! But what if vomit has been on the menu a while? You need to control those habits. And you do that by building better ones; involving others; involving God.

Otherwise, God might involve Himself, as He does with Abraham!

2) The Need To Manage Fears. What causes Abraham to mess up, again? What can cause us? Essentially, it's a back problem: a yellow streak.

It's fear (vs11).

Fear can cause us to do the wrong thing: to be stingy, to give in to peer pressure, to compromise sexually. But it can also cause us not to do the right thing: not to follow Jesus; not to stand up for what's right; not to talk to people about our faith. I.e. it encourages us to live a lie. As the Roman historian Tacitus put it: "Fear is not in the habit of speaking truth." Not only that, but fear itself is often a lie – a lie that says God isn't good or great, that He doesn't love us and that He's not in control. And that can trigger a chain-reaction that leads to forgetfulness, and faithlessness.

That's why Abraham puts Sarah – and Abimelech, too – in such a terrible position, and disobeys God in the process. He tells himself that there's no fear of God here (when there is!), and that God has forsaken him (when He hasn't!). Which leads us onto the one fear that isn't a negative but a positive, a fear that Abimelech demonstrates, and Abraham doesn't: the fear of God. As it says in Psalm 111:10, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of Wisdom."

So again, the message is: be more like Abimelech, less like Abraham.

Who'd have thought it?!

3) The Need To Live It Out. When Abimelech summons Abraham, he says to him, "What have you done to us?!" Which is tragic, when you consider Abraham is supposed to be God's representative and a blessing to the nations! Proverbs 25:26 puts it like this: "Like a muddied spring or a polluted well is a righteous man who falters before the wicked." I.e. when we intentionally sin in the eyes of an unbelieving world, it's like we've become a bottle of murky water: neither appetising or good for others! And it's not doing God any favours, either – because whatever we do says something about the God we claim to believe in.

E.g. the Bible says God is a God of love. So what do people need to see in us? Love. God is a God of grace. So what do people need to see in us? Grace. God is a God of truth. So what do people need to see in us? Truth. God is a God of righteousness. So what do people need to see in us? Righteousness (not self-righteousness, an 'I'm better than you' attitude, but one that says, "God is changing me, for the better. He can change you, too").

Actions speak louder than words. Speak loudest. Because it's not what you *say* that proves what you believe – it's what you *do*. And if we say we believe and it doesn't show, we probably don't. Not as much as we think, anyway!

God Can Still Use Us

So, Abraham lies (again); forces Sarah to lie (again); and almost loses her in a political marriage (again). Except God intervenes by warning Abimelech, vindicating Sarah – and shaming Abraham! Which might seem a bit harsh on Abraham, but in reality, it's all done out of love – for Abraham and Sarah, and for Abimelech and his family. I.e. God is willing to make us feel uncomfortable sometimes, because He loves us. But also because integrity matters.

That much.

A final thought: when you look at the faith-journey of Abraham, it's often a case of 2 steps forward, 1 step back. One day a hero; next day an idiot! And we can be like that, too. Reassuringly, God refers to him as a prophet (first occurrence) and listens to his prayer for Abimelech and his family. Now some of us, maybe we know we've not been as wholehearted as we should be. The message here is: Jesus died for us, wants what's best for us, and wants to use us.

But –

He also calls us to be people of integrity. So ... let's be!