Sunday, September 26, 1999
INTEGRITY DEFICIT DISORDER
Matthew 21:28-32

We live in a world of many different kinds of disorders. Some of them are physical, some are mental, and still others are spiritual and have to do with our character. In a sermon series I began earlier this summer on some of the spiritual and character deficit disorders, the title of the first one was, “Vision Deficit Disorder.” The second, two months later, was “Faith Deficit Disorder.” The third in the series was about marriage and had a reverse title, “Commitment Abundance Harmony,” the opposite of “Commitment Deficit Disorder.”

The title of today’s fourth sermon in the series is: “Integrity Deficit Disorder.” What is integrity? Some synonyms for integrity are: goodness, honesty, honor, morality, principle, trustworthiness, and righteousness.

What are some of the symptoms of integrity deficit disorder?

A person who is afflicted with this disorder knows what’s right but doesn’t follow through and do what’s right. He or she makes a promise or commitment, then fails to keep it. Thus, when you meet a person with integrity deficit disorder, you’re never quite sure if you can trust that person or not.

A second symptom is also one of the causes: people who have integrity deficit disorder live from the outside in rather than from the inside out. They let their feelings and emotional responses of the moment govern their behavior more than doing what’s right regardless of their feelings of the moment.

To put it another way, people with integrity deficit disorder are reactive rather than proactive. Reactive individuals base their decisions and actions on the outward circumstances of the moment, what’s going on around them. If someone is rude to them, they are rude in return. They are affected by their social environment. Reactive people build their emotional lives around the behavior of others, empowering the weaknesses of other people to control them. They let other people decide how they are going to act.

In addition, reactive people are often affected by the physical environment. If the weather is good, they feel good. If it isn’t, they let it affect their attitude and their performance. Worse still, reactive people blame whatever happens to them on someone or something outside of them. They rarely take any responsibility for what’s happened to them. It’s always the fault of someone or something else.

In the syndicated comic strip, Frank and Ernest, two bums are sitting along a wall talking with each other. One says to the other, “Do you believe in fate?” The other replies, “Sure. I’d hate to think I turned out like this because of something I had control over.”

On the other hand, proactive people carry their own weather with them. Whether it rains or shines makes no difference to them. They are value-driven, and if their value is to produce good quality work, it isn’t a function of whether the weather is conducive to it or not. Proactive people also do not let the social environment control their actions or decisions.

That's where integrity comes in. Having integrity is about behaving in the way you promised to behave, even though the mood in which you made the promises has changed or the environment outside you has changed. If you have integrity, it protects you from your changing moods, desires, and feelings. It even protects you from the changing moods of other people. It protects you from saying you are going to do something and then not following through.

One day, Jesus told a story designed for people who have integrity deficit disorder. His target audience was people who claimed to be the most religious.

A man had two sons, and he went to the first and said, "Go and work in the vineyard today." The first son said, "No," but afterward repented and went. And he said to the second son, "Go and work in the vineyard," and he said, "Yes," but he did not go. "Which of these two," asked Jesus, "did the will of his father?" And they answered, "The first." Jesus could also have asked the question in another way, "Which of these two sons had integrity deficit disorder?" And hopefully, they would have answered, "The second."

To more fully understand this story, here's the context in which it was told.

Jesus had been talking and arguing with some of the religious leaders of his time who had been critical of him and his disciples because of their association with sinners and unbelievers, the outcasts of society. Such people did not have the correct theology. Thus, they could not possibly know the will of God or do it. God certainly would not accept such people.

To make matters worse, some of these undesirable people had become followers and close associates of Jesus. Did they have enough Biblical knowledge? Did they know all the rules of religion? Did they know what was right?

So it was that Jesus told this story as a way of replying to the complaints and criticisms against him. Like the first son, even though they had said "no" to God because they had not followed all the religious rules, now they were responding to the message of Jesus and were doing God's will anyway.

The parable tells us that God is more interested in our actions, in our behavior, in what we do, rather than in our promises, our words, or what we say we believe, or what we say we are going to do.

Remember, the first son in the parable said that he would not work in the vineyard but then repented and did what was right. The second son, however, promised that he would work in the vineyard and then didn't show up.

In terms of our religious faith, God is not much interested in what we say we believe or in how many solemn promises we make, or whether we say the right words in our prayers, or use the most precise theological language, or how pious we might appear to be. God wants to know how we are living our faith in our day-to-day decisions and actions.

Both sons in the story knew what was the right thing to do. One did it, and the other did not. One had integrity deficit disorder; the other did not.

What are some of the causes of integrity deficit disorder?

One reason we don't always do what is right, even though we know what's right, is that doing the right thing can be difficult and even painful. So, to avoid pain or rejection, we take the easy way out. As I indicated earlier, it grows out of one of the symptoms of integrity deficit disorder: we are reactive instead of proactive.

For example, it can be difficult to do the right thing when that means going against our peer group. The easy way out is to go along with the crowd, even though we know it's wrong. Sometimes doing the right thing involves confrontation, conflict, bad feelings, and the possibility of not being accepted.

Going along with the crowd, however, is not the way to build integrity. Jesus lived and taught that the way to build solid, supportive, healthy relationships, self-respect, and a quality life begins with the sometimes painful decision to do the right thing and then to do it. Furthermore, Jesus taught that we human beings can derive the deepest satisfaction in life in the act of resisting temptations, from not getting someone, something, or someplace the easy way if it means compromising our integrity. We human beings, because we are made in the image of God, can derive joy from having good character because God made us with that possibility. When we begin to fulfill the potential with which we were created, then we are in harmony with God. One good definition of good character or integrity is "what you do when no one else is looking."

How then can you become more like the first son in the parable so that you do the right thing even when at first you were going in the wrong direction? What are some of the steps toward overcoming integrity deficit disorder?

In studying the parable again this past week in preparation for this sermon, several words jumped out at me. They are the most important words in the story: "He changed his mind." Other translations of the Bible say, "He repented." Even though the first son told his dad that he would not work in the vineyard, he repented and went to work. He had enough courage and conscience to admit to himself and to God that he had made a mistake. The second son just didn't show up.

Repentance is never easy. It's painful to own up to your mistakes, to own up to your bad decisions — but that's what people of integrity are able to do — admit when they are wrong and change the direction of their living. So the first step toward overcoming integrity deficit disorder is to be able to repent when necessary and change your direction.

The second step in overcoming integrity deficit disorder is to practice doing the right thing no matter what. In the first chapter of the book Timeless Healing, Dr. Herbert Benson describes his father as a man who did the right things. He writes, "My father tried to impress upon me and my siblings the importance of doing things right. He told us about the time a shopkeeper had to let him go from his job of sweeping up. To finish the job well, my dad was especially thorough cleaning up that night, so the next day the shopkeeper called to tell my father that if he was willing to return, the shopkeeper would find the financial means to keep him on."

The third step in overcoming integrity deficit disorder is to remember that integrity is more than the words we say or the promises we make. Recently, it was reported in some poll that 95% of the people in this country said they believe in God. Earlier this year, one of the news stories following the terrible tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, was about Cassie Bernall, a student. One of the killers asked her, "Do you believe in God?" She said, "Yes," and he shot her dead. We do not know if her affirmative answer is what caused her

death. I doubt that if she had answered “no,” she would have lived. A sincere atheist or agnostic would likely have met the same fate as she did.

When you ask someone, “Do you believe in God?” and that person answers “Yes,” there are several crucial follow-up questions that need to be asked: “What kind of God do you believe in?” “How does your belief in God affect your actions and behavior?” In other words, “What difference does your belief in God make in your life?” Many slaveholders and slave traders believed in God. There are many Ku Klux Klansmen who say they believe in God. Church leaders who burned at the stake those individuals they considered to be heretics were strong believers in God.

In the case of Cassie, who was shot dead, her mother has now written a book about her daughter, and according to her mother, Cassie’s belief in God did make a tremendous positive difference in her life. Before she became a believer, she was a very troubled young woman. In her book, her mother tells how she and her husband intervened in Cassie’s life after finding letters in her room that described occult spells and ways to murder one’s parents. Although she doesn’t see her daughter as a martyr, her mother concludes that Cassie’s death was indeed a triumph of honesty and courage.

If you want to overcome integrity deficit disorder, it means more than saying you believe in God in the same way as the second son needed to do more than simply say he was going to work in the vineyard and then did not do so.

The God I believe in — and I hope you believe in — as revealed by Jesus, is a God who has created each and every human being everywhere in God’s own image. So it is that worth exists in all of us, not only in members of one particular group or religion. I further believe this God loves each and every one of us unconditionally. And one of the best ways to serve and worship this God is by treating each human being with dignity. Being a person of integrity is one good way to do this. Amen.