

The Integrity-Filled Church

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Acts: The Irresistible Church Series

Acts 4:36 - 5:11

A little over a year ago South Carolina Governor, Mark Sanford, disappeared for almost a week without telling anyone where he went. Now it is very difficult to completely disappear when you are a State Governor. Apparently, his closest aides and even his wife did not know where he went. Initially, he claimed that he was walking the Appalachian Trail in order to re-energize his batteries following a tough budget fight with the State Legislature.

When his car was discovered at the Atlanta Airport and some reporters spotted him there and in addition one of his constituents saw him on an airplane to Buenos Aires, he admitted that he had flown to Argentina because he found Buenos Aires to be rejuvenating. Reporters asked him what he was doing in Buenos Aires, Governor Sanford responded saying that he took long drives along the coastal road near the city. When reporters discovered that the coastal road near the city was only two miles long and that unless he drove in circles, he couldn't have had much of a drive, Governor Sanford finally admitted that he was having an affair with an Argentinean woman.

"I was walking the Appalachian Trail. I traveled to Argentina to re-energize my batteries." As one State Senator from Governor Sanford's own party said, "Lies, lies, lies – that's all we get from his staff. That's all we get from his people. That's all we get from him: Why all the big cover-up?"

There was a recent tell-all book written by former North Carolina Senator John Edwards' aide, Andrew Young. It's not the Andy Young of Atlanta – that is someone entirely different. This Andrew Young wrote a book titled *Politician*. In this particular account, John Edwards' wife, Elizabeth, got cancer. A couple of years later John met a woman named Rielle Hunter, who is a self-described filmmaker, at a bar in New York. He hired her to make a series of web-documentaries of his campaign for the Presidency (which was his first mistake – never hire someone you meet in a bar to work on your presidential campaign. And while she was working for the Edwards' campaign, John and Rielle began to have an affair. He actually brought her to his mansion and slept with her in his marital bed.

In October 2007 the National Inquirer reported that Edwards was having an affair. The next day Edwards vehemently denied the affair to reporters saying: "The story is false. It is completely untrue, ridiculous...I've been in love with the same woman for 30+ years and anybody who's ever been around us knows she

is an extraordinary human being: warm, loving, beautiful, sexy, and as good a person as I've ever known."

Two months later the *National Inquirer* published a picture of Rielle Hunter pregnant. A few months after that a daughter was born to Rielle; the father's name was left off the birth certificate. As rumors of his affair continued to dog his campaign, Edwards repeatedly denied anything inappropriate. Working on a tip, the *National Inquirer* reporters staked out the Beverly Hilton Hotel and discovered Edwards visiting Rielle Hunter at the Beverly Hilton.

A couple of weeks later, Edwards finally admitted that he was having an affair, but that he was not the father of Hunter's baby. He asked Andy Young, his aide, to say that he was the father of the baby which Andy Young agreed to do. And over the course of a couple of years John Edwards apparently paid hundreds of thousands of dollars in hush money to his mistress. The hush money came from a 99-year old widow and heiress to the great Mellon fortune. She gave the Edwards' campaign hundreds of thousands of dollars in checks and cash hidden in candy boxes.

In a final attempt to cover up paternity, Edwards asked Andy Young to get a doctor to fake the DNA test so that he could continue to allege that he wasn't the father of Rielle's baby. Ultimately, Edwards was forced to admit that he was, indeed, the father of this baby saying that he would be there for his daughter and provide for her; and that he hoped in the future she would be able to forgive him.

This is only the latest of many sex scandals and attempted cover-ups in the past few years. What is the preoccupation of our culture?

What is the preoccupation of our culture: appearance and cover-up

Years ago a church member came to me and told me a story regarding what happened in his former church. A huge sum of money was taken by the pastor to pay for the pastor's new home and furnishings. The church member was on the deacon's board and knew something was amiss. When he asked questions about this money, he was labeled a trouble-maker. Eventually word got out regarding the pastor's misappropriation of funds. The church leadership first relabeled the money as "early retirement" and then a loan to the pastor. Financial files were taken and shredded to cover the pastor's actions.

Things came to a head at a church meeting. The deacon was asked about the money and told the truth: the money was not early retirement and it was certainly not a loan. The administrative pastor was asked: was the money a loan?

And then in a most tragic case, a mother in South Carolina was accused of suffocating her two children. She then tried to cover it up by staging an auto accident.

Small acts of vanity, huge acts of immorality, tragic cases of murder.

I've been doing a series from the book of Acts and as we've studied the early history of the Christian church we've been exploring how it was that this most unlikely group of people ever succeeded against all the odds, against all of the power of the Roman Empire, the sophistication of Greek philosophy, the opposition of Jewish religious leaders. What made the early church grow? Why did the church eventually take the whole Roman Empire? What made the church so attractive, so irresistible, that people in the ancient Roman Empire flooded into the church by the thousands and tens of thousands?

We talked about the church's involvement in healing. We've talked about the leadership of the early church. We've talked about the church's spiritual empowerment and its response to persecution.

But in my mind, in the culture in which spin and evasion and cover ups and half truths and flat-out lying have become the norms of the day, if an individual, group or a church was known for rock-solid integrity for handling money, sex, and power truthfully and rightfully; and when there was a failure in one of these areas that that individual, group, or church immediately and forthrightly acknowledged the failure without evasion or cover-up, I don't know if there is anything that would make the church or an individual more attractive these days than if they were known for simple integrity.

I've called today's talk, "The Integrity-Filled Church." Let's pray.

Acts 4:36 - 5:11

36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), 37 sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. 1 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. 2 With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. 3 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God." 5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. 6 Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. 7 About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 Peter

asked her, “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?” “Yes,” she said, “that is the price.” 9 Peter said to her, “How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of those who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.” 10 At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. 11 Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

What does integrity look like?

Luke is deliberately contrasting the example of Barnabas with the story that follows with Ananias and his wife, Sapphira. With Barnabas we read this:

Acts 4:36 - 37

36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), 37 sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.

Barnabas is an extraordinary example of generosity and unselfishness. We find him later on generously and unselfishly cloaking the Apostle Paul with his credibility when the other apostles were suspicious of Paul believing that he was a plant and that he was insincere about his conversion. It was Barnabas, who unselfishly and generously promoted the Apostle Paul above himself in ministry a few years later. It was Barnabas who unselfishly and generously gave a good report concerning Gentiles, who were coming to faith in Christ at a church in Antioch. And here in Acts 4 there is Barnabas unselfishly and generously giving away to the church the entire sales price of a piece of property that he sold.

We human beings especially we 21st century folks living in America have gotten so good at cover up and spin and focusing upon appearance. How can you tell what someone is like at their core? When you peel back the layers how do we get a handle on another person’s real character. How do you get a handle on your own real character because we can be engaged in so much evasion that we begin to deceive even ourselves?

One real test for a person’s character is to look at the qualities of unselfishness and generosity. Scott Peck, who is a psychiatrist at my alma mater, Case Western Reserve, wrote a chilling book a few years ago titled *People of the Lie* in which he explored a psychology of evil and wickedness that he discovered present in some of his patients.

One of the things that Scott Peck said in his book was that in his experience evil people are remarkably greedy people. He said that he has repeatedly found that generosity and unselfishness often correspond with basic goodness and that cheapness and being closed-fisted correspond with evil in his patients.

What do you see in yourself, friend? Are you a giver? Would you say that you are generous to those in need? Would you say that you are really open-handed regarding your giving to the church? Are you tight-fisted?

In sharp contrast to Barnabas we have the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-2:

Acts 5:1-2

1 Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. 2 With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

What was their sin?

They wanted a good reputation without a good reality.

Outwardly, Ananias and Sapphira looked just like Barnabas. They sold a piece of property and claimed to give all the proceeds to the church, just like good old Barnabas. The difference was the Barnabas brought all the sale money, while Ananias brought only a percentage. It wasn't just that they held back, although Peter accuses them of that. It was that they also wanted the credit and prestige of being seen as generous without having any of the reality.

Again, let me quote from Scott Peck's book, *People of the Lie*. Here is what Dr. Peck says about evil people:

Utterly dedicated to preserving their self-image of perfection, they are unceasingly engaged in the effort to maintain the appearance of moral purity. They worry about this a great deal. They are acutely sensitive to social norms and to what others might think of them. They dress well, go to work on time, pay their taxes, and outwardly seem to live lives that are above reproach.

The words "image," "appearance," and "outwardly" are crucial to understanding the morality of evil. While they seem to lack any motivation to be good, they intensely desire to appear good. Their "goodness" is all on a level of pretense. It is, in effect, a lie. That is why I call them the "People of the Lie."

Evil people whitewash everything. They rationalize their misdeeds away. They scapegoat and blame everyone else for the wrong they do. They deceive others in an attempt to deceive themselves because they do not want to face up to the awfulness that is in them. For them all their energy is devoted to appearance. And so they lie.

Acts 5:3 - 5

3 Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 4 Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God.”5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.

What is wrong with lying? Why does God hate lying and cover-up so much?

Just parenthetically, many sensitive commentators have really struggled with this passage. My goodness, Ananias and Sapphira tell a lie and they are struck dead. How do we explain this? People tell lies all the time in the church and cover-up, but we don’t seem them dying.

The Apostle Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 3.16-17:

1 Corinthians 3:16-17

16Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst? 17If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for God’s temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

This passage is not saying that you individuals are temples of the Holy Spirit. Paul does say that later. He says: “You the church collectively as you gather together are the temple of the Spirit. You serve the same function today as the Temple did in Old Testament times. You are the dwelling place of God on earth.”

Now when you consider all of the rules governing Temple worship and the fact that people didn’t simply waltz into God’s presence, but needed to come carefully and you consider that in the Old Testament, people who were cavalier about his presence ended up dead, you realize God’s presence is not to be casually regarded in any age. Clearly God was demonstrably and tangibly present in the New Testament church. Anecdotally, I have read stories of people in church history who during times of revival suddenly died due to hidden sin. This is, of course, generally not the case. But it seems that the greater the presence of God, the fiercer the judgment for disregarding his presence.

Luke is clearly drawing a parallel between Ananias and Sapphira and what they did in the church and Achan and what he did back in ancient Israel recorded in the Old Testament. God is laying a foundation for his people at the beginning say: “There is almost nothing more important to me than integrity. I hate lying.”

Why does God hate lying so much?

The damage lying does to others

Sissela Bok is a writer and philosopher at Harvard. She wrote a fascinating book titled *Lying* some years ago.

In this book she poses this thought experiment. She said: Imagine a society, no matter how ideal in other respects, where word and gesture could never be counted upon. Imagine if you lived in a world where you couldn't rely upon anything that anyone else told you, that all of the information given was worthless. You could not live in a world like that. If you didn't know that when the government said that the water was safe to drink whether you could drink it or not without your own personal verification; if you didn't know when an inspector said that a building was safe to walk in was in fact safe to walk in. You wouldn't be able to eat, drink or function without truth-telling.

Society is impossible; you can't have relationship without truth. Families can't hang together if their relationships are building on lies. Marriage collapses when the lies pile up. Samuel Johnson, the old English writer, once said that the devils themselves do not lie to one another. The society of hell could not function without truth anymore than any society can. And the church, the temple of the Holy Spirit, is destroyed. We can't function together unless we tell each other the truth.

If you want to know how bad lying is consider how you feel when you find out that you've been deceived about something that is really a big deal. Let's say you discover that you've been lied to your whole life about the identity of your parents – who your father is. Or you have been repeatedly deceived regarding the affection of your spouse or the trustworthiness of your accountant, or the bookkeeper who works for the business that you own.

How do you feel when you discover that a close friend has repeatedly lied to your face?

Do you want to know how bad lying is? How would you feel if you discovered that your doctor has been lying to you about one of your medical conditions?

Not only does lying destroy relationship, but being lied to feels so bad because it steals from you your power to choose. If the doctor told you the truth you might choose a different course for your medical treatment. But the doctor's lies took that power away from you. Your spouse's lies about an affair takes your power to choose a different course regarding your marriage away from you. People have been lied to, especially in important relationships – friendships and marriage, in church – find it difficult to trust again. There are few things we can do worse to another human being than lie to them.

Gallup completed a 3-year study on leadership a few years ago. The goal was to discover what average people said they wanted from their leaders. They did a random study of 10,000 average people and said: What is it that you need from people that you follow - church leaders, school leaders, government leaders, employers? Here is what Gallup discovered. The four top answers regarding followers' basic needs: Trust, Compassion, Stability, and Hope.

Number 1 above everything else that people wanted in a leader was to be able to trust them. That's what we want in our spouses – not just sexual fidelity although that's massively important. Above all, we need for our spouses to be dependable, to keep their word, to be able to trust them with our money, our bodies, our futures, our possessions, our kids, goals, dreams and secrets. No marriage can flourish when we're worrying all the time whether or not our mates can simply be relied on.

Why does God hate lying? It is because of the damage done to others and it is because of:

The damage lying does the liar

We read in Acts 5:3 these words:

Acts 5:3

Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?"

Repeatedly lying, evading the truth, spinning, covering-up opens the door of our spirit to demonic domination. The Bible teaches that there are entryways, there are open doors to demonic infiltration of the human spirit. So, for example, we read this in Ephesians 4:26-27,

Ephesians 4:26-27

26 "In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, 27 and do not give the devil a foothold."

In this passage Paul was speaking about unchecked anger and he says that if you don't deal with your anger and you repeatedly give vent to your rage, you are going to give the devil a foothold in your life. The word "foothold" translates the Greek word, topos. It could be translated "opportunity." Don't give the devil an opportunity in your life. Don't open the door to the devil.

That's what lying does. It gives a foothold; it gives an opportunity; it gives an entryway for demonic darkness to grow in your souls. You lie so much that you become a lie. You deceive so much that you become a deception.

Lying destroys the liar. Someone once observed that it is easy to tell a lie, but it is hard to tell only one. The first lie must be thatched with another, or it will rain through. You tell one lie and then you need another to cover the first lie; and then you need more and more lies to cover those lied. Over time the strain of trying to remember what you said to whom and to disentangle all of the untruths becomes greater and greater. The energy, the sheer energy that you need to shore up all of these lies is enormous. It is something that honest people don't have to deal with. All of this psychic energy to keep going and living a lie.

Do you know that recent brain studies tell us that the neurological connections in our brains actually change by our choices. We actually, through our choices, continually rewire our brains. We're used to thinking that our brains are basically neutral machines that we can easily turn one direction or the other, that it really doesn't matter what you do, you can easily redirect your mind. But brain science is now telling us: No, that's not the way it works. What you do and what you become physically are tied together. When you lie to a friend, or you lie to your spouse, you are actually creating a neuro-pathway in your brain that makes it easier for you to lie in the future.

God hates lying because it destroys the liar; you become a lie. And worst of all, if you keep lying, you will destroy your Christian faith.

Here is what we read in 1 Timothy 1:18-19.

1 Timothy 1: 18 - 19

18 Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well, 19 holding on to faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith.

As a pastor I have watched this process happen in so many people's lives. When someone does something wrong; they do something that violates their principles and they cover it up with lies and they keep violating their conscience. Do you know what I see happen? The person suddenly has a faith crisis. It's like saying, "I find it really hard to believe..." I see this repeatedly in young adults who violate their consciences. They start saying, "I don't know if I still believe the Christian faith of my parents." So many intellectual crises with the Christian faith are really moral crises. I can't expect to feel God's presence in my life; I can't expect to experience his goodness, or even be confident about his existence while I continue to live a lie.

Well, God exposes lying.

God exposes lying

Somehow Peter knew, perhaps through a prophetic word, that Ananias and his wife Sapphira were lying. God does that. If you are present in a church that is sensitive to the voice of the Spirit, God might give someone near you a dream about you that exposes the truth. He might give someone a prophetic word or in some way pull the cover back.

What's inside will eventually come out. Character has to do with your inner reality, who you really are. It will come out.

Sometimes when I've been terribly confused, wondering if a person was lying to me, I've gone before the Lord and repeatedly asked God to expose the truth. Pull the cover back. Reveal the foundations, Lord. And God has been faithful to answer that prayer.

One of the major things that God does to show the inside of a person is to allow adversity to come into a person's life. You know what's in a person when they get knocked over, just like you know what is in a glass when it gets knocked over. You know what's inside of a tube of toothpaste when it gets squeezed; you know what's inside of an individual when they get squeezed. When life is hard you see the inner reality.

What creates integrity?

So what creates integrity? Acts 5: 7 – 8:

Acts 5:7 - 8

7 About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price."

Acknowledge when you've blown it

Sapphira was given an opportunity to repent. She refused. In *People of the Lie*, Scott Peck drew a distinction between evil and ordinary sin. Here is his distinction.

The central defect of true evil is not the sin, but the refusal to acknowledge it.

It's the cover-up. It is John Edwards and Mark Sanford confronted by overwhelming evidence of their affairs. It is you and it is me. It is lying when you are confronted. A person has evidence of your deception, but you just keep deceiving. I understand because I've covered up many times. I've feared that this person was going to reject me. I was embarrassed. I didn't want the person to think less of me. I wanted to retain my reputation. I didn't like facing their anger or upset.

But over time, step by step, you can train yourself to say three little words that are at the foundation of all goodness: I blew it.

I blew it

What creates integrity? Acknowledge when you are wrong. Cop to it. I was wrong. I blew it.

Second,

Fear the Lord

Two times in this text Luke reports that great fear came upon the church.

Acts 5:5

When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.

Acts 5:11

Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.

What does it mean to fear the Lord? It doesn't mean to shrink away from God in terror, as if God is some horrible abuser. The fear of the Lord is to treat God with reverent respect, with awe. Romans 8:15-16 distinguishes between two types of fear.

Romans 8:15-16

15 The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."¹⁶The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

There are two types of fear that we must distinguish. There is the fear of a slave, the fear of being beaten that the New Testament says the blood of Christ delivers us from. But then there is the fear of a son or daughter of God that the Bible encourages a reverent respectful trust for our Father in Heaven. The fear of a slave causes you to shrink, to be discouraged, to become deflated and feel disempowered. The fear of a son energizes. The fear of a son empowers. The fear of a son spurs you to holiness.

We 21st century people have lost the capacity to hold two things together – love and deep reverence. In the 21st century we think if someone loves us they're just going to support us no matter what we are and no matter what we've done. If you love me, you will support me no matter what. Love has lost any sense of respect, any sense of reverence, any sense of authority. I can cheat on you; I can lie to you; I can steal from you; I can walk all over you – your job is to support

me. If you allow someone to walk all over you and not respect you and not treat you with reverence and dignity; that's not love, that's just neurotic weakness.

Love in the Bible is that quality in which we desire what is best for another person. God, who is perfect love, wants what is best for you and when he sees you destroying yourself by sinning and then covering it up, he will beat back the darkness in your life and bring you fully into the light. He knows that we are freest, we are most whole, we are most happy, and we are most secure when we walk in the light and when we walk in reverent humility before God. We flourish only when we are in the light and never in the dark.

Fear of God. The right fear of God causes human beings to flourish.

What creates integrity? Acknowledge when you've blown it. Fear the Lord. Fear invoking the name of Jesus over your life and over your family while you continually spit at him. Finally,

Fear your own sin

One of the great choker chains that the Lord has used on me repeatedly to keep me from further sin is the fear of what I will become, if God removed the brake. Romans 1 says that when people choose repeatedly to walk away from God, God hands us over. He gives us up to what our hearts are craving. There are times when we are facing a choice as if we were at the top of a ski jump and God says, "Pull back; don't do it." There is that moment of maybe – should I or shouldn't I? Should I push off, or should I step away?

What keeps us from pushing off in that moment of maybe is the fear that if I make this choice, if I push off, God may remove the brake and I may not stop until I hit bottom.

Friends, haven't you seen this in your own lives? You hit one of those moments of maybe – should I click on this website or not? Should I enter this illicit relationship or not? Should I compromise this principle? Should I abuse this substance again or not?

You push off and head downhill without a brake. Not only do things get darker and darker, but something happens inside. The Apostle Paul talks in 1 Timothy about the possibility of a seared conscience. Things that used to seem horrible to us no longer seem horrible. We've grown dull and insensitive to our own sin. We don't feel bad about what used to make us feel bad. A callous grows over your heart to the voice of God.

Here is the hope of the gospel: the blood of Jesus Christ can restore our consciences. If you are willing to come into the light with God, to be transparent before him, to say: here's what I've been involved in – no cover-ups, no

rationalizations, no excuses, no scape-goating – here’s where I am God, here is what I’ve been involved in. If you are willing to say to God: God, I not only am asking you to remove the consequences of what I’ve done, but I’m willing to change my behavior. I’m willing to do whatever it takes to turn around. The Bible says the blood of Jesus Christ will cleanse you and restore you and restore integrity and goodness to your soul. Let’s pray.

The Integrity-Filled Church

Rich Nathan

August 22, 2010

Acts: The Irresistible Church Series

Acts 4:36 – 5:11

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