

The Quest for Consistency (Integrity - Chapter 1)

Ready:

Remember your leaders who have spoken God's word to you. As you carefully observe the outcome of their lives, imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Hebrews 13:7-8

Set

Living in full view of the microscopic public eye can test the will of even the strongest of characters. Tony Dungy can certainly attest to that brutal truth. As the celebrated head coach of the Indianapolis Colts, he's experienced the pinnacle of success, the most tragic of personal losses and everything in between.

For the average Joe, experiencing a few highs and lows with plenty of non-descript days in between is simply called "life." But for Dungy—when every detail is reported, discussed, prognosticated and opined—life is something completely different and looks more like a virtual three-ring circus in which triumphs and defeats are fodder for the masses.

That's why integrity is so vital in the life of the Christian. After all, everyone is in the public eye to some degree, with followers of Christ attracting much of the scrutinizing spotlight. And that's what makes Dungy so special. His integrity is unwavering, his character rock solid—no matter what circumstance comes his way. It's a quality that people can't help but notice from up close and from far away.

"The greatest things I have learned from Coach Dungy would have to be humility and consistency," Indianapolis tight end Ben Utecht says. "He truly leads by example, and he does it consistently. This allows people to really see his faith every single day, and that's the most important thing."

Not only do his players recognize Dungy's steady approach, but the men and women who cover the national sports scene also are amazed at his impeccable commitment to doing the right thing. "Tony Dungy is probably the most even-keeled person I have ever met," ESPN anchor Chris Berman says. "In the span of just over a year, he experienced a personal low that can get no lower—the tragic death of his son—and the professional high that can be no higher—winning the Super Bowl. The way he carried himself in both situations, you wouldn't know the difference, really, in what event just occurred. I don't know many people who could do that. I love him for his fortitude and his unbelievable ability to stay the course."

"Tony is a man of such inner strength that you can't help but be inspired by him," ESPN *Monday Night Football* reporter Michelle Tafoya adds. "He is consistent, composed and

compassionate. I've never met another coach like him, and I don't expect to. From Tony, I have learned that you can be successful while maintaining your integrity, that you can be composed while being competitive, and that you can leave a legacy based on character."

Those strong words are echoed by countless others and reflect the sentiment of people who have observed Dungy's nearly 30 years within the coaching ranks. Amazingly, all but one year of his entire career have taken place inside the demanding confines of the National Football League, where coaches are required to spend 80 hours a week on the job just to have a sniff at success and where character and integrity are challenged on a daily basis.

Yet somehow, Dungy has served as a head coach since 1996 and managed not only to maintain a high standard of integrity but also to become a role model of character for coaches and athletes at every level of competition—from the Pee Wee League all the way to the NFL.

"Integrity, to me, is what you are all about," Dungy says. "It's what's inside of you. And what's inside is eventually going to come out when it gets to a critical situation. That, to me, is the difference between a championship team and just a good team. That's the difference between a person you really want to follow and someone who is just another person in your life. With people of integrity, you know what you are going to get because that person is the same way all the time; situations don't change them. That's what I look for in players, and that's what I want to give players from a leadership standpoint—that they can count on me to be the same no matter what. Being the same is not just being mediocre. It's really being the person that God wants you to be all the time."

Dungy's legacy of integrity began not as a coach but as a player. The Michigan native was the starting quarterback at the University of Minnesota from 1973 to 1976 and spent his freshman season playing on the basketball team as well. As a free agent, he signed with the Pittsburgh Steelers as a defensive back. He was later converted to wide receiver and then to safety. In his second season, Dungy took part in the Steelers' 35-31 victory over Dallas in Super Bowl XIII.

After two years in Pittsburgh and one year in San Francisco, Dungy returned to his alma mater to coach the defensive backs for a season. By 1981, he was back in the NFL for good. After assistant coaching stints in Pittsburgh, Kansas City and Minnesota, his sphere of influence expanded when he was named head coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. And while the demands on his life increased, so too did notice of his ability to display grace under fire. The assistant coaches and support staff that surrounded him were particularly quick to see this.

One of those impressionable coworkers was Les Steckel, who served as Tony Dungy's offensive coordinator in Tampa Bay for the 2000 season. Steckel, who is now president of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, learned quickly how his former boss's word consistently reflected his integrity—so much so that he never questioned anything Dungy said.

"Someone had told me that Tony had memorized the book of James," Steckel recalls. "I went up to Tony after practice one day during the summer and I said, 'Hey, Tony, I hear you memorized the book of James this summer.' And he said, 'Yeah.' That's all he said, and I didn't ask him anything else. He said, 'Yeah,' and I believed him."

After turning the Buccaneers organization into a winner (even falling just six points shy of a berth in Super Bowl XXXIV), he was sought out by Indianapolis Colts' owner Jim Irsay to

replace Jim Mora. Irsay says that Dungy reminded him of the legendary Dallas Cowboys' coach Tom Landry. He was impressed by Dungy's ability to win with integrity and saw him as the visionary who could lead the Colts to the NFL's Promised Land.

"The most important quality for any head coach is to be the leader of men," Irsay says. "Tony has those qualities. He never shies away from difficult circumstances. He's very pragmatic in terms of the way he looks at things. He has a lot of street smarts, and he's extremely competitive. The fires burn in there deeply, and people demonstrate that in different ways. But he's as competitive as Lombardi or any coach who might have been more outward with their emotions. He's very intelligent. He has a great understanding of the game. He grew up under great teachers, so all of those things were there to give him the pedigree to make him a Hall of Fame NFL coach."

While Dungy would surely blush at Irsay's words of praise, he would also be hard pressed to reject his team-owner's assertion that integrity and consistency play a vital role in the success of any coach. Dungy says that holds especially true with more experienced athletes who require larger doses of trust in their leaders.

"Sometimes I think when you're dealing with younger players—junior high, high school—they're going to follow the coach because he's the authority figure," Dungy says. "They've been taught that they just have to follow that adult figure. But when you're dealing with professional athletes and college athletes, that goes out the window. They're going to follow you because they believe in you, and they see something that causes them to follow you. So I think it's even more important for us to build those relationships for our players and to not be anything different than they think we are because they're not going to buy into it, and they're not going to follow you wholeheartedly if there are any chinks in the armor."

For Dungy, his intense desire to live a life of integrity began at an early age. His parents, Dr. Wilbur and CleoMae Dungy, were both educators in Jackson, Michigan, where Dungy was born and raised. Although both have since passed on, their example of honesty, character and integrity continues to inspire him to always do what's right in the eyes of God.

While coaching in Tampa, Dungy took his commitment to integrity within the family a step further by helping cofound a program called All Pro Dads—a division of a larger organization known as Family First. The group hosts special events at various NFL stadiums and encourages fathers to step up their commitment in the home. Taking part in such an organization is a natural extension of the kind of parent Dungy strives to be in his own family.

"It's very important to let my family know that here are our standards," Dungy says. "Here are the Lord's standards. This is what we're going to try to live up to. Sure we're going to fail at times. We're going to fall short. But this is our role model. This is what we're all about. This is what people can expect to see hopefully all the time. And I think that's very important. Your family sees a lot more of you than your players do. If you're not totally transparent, and if you're not totally honest and have that integrity at home, then it's going to show up sooner there than it does at work."

During the 2005 season, Dungy's integrity as a father was put to an unexpected and life-altering test. His oldest son, James, who was attending college in Tampa at the time, took his own life. The quest for a Super Bowl title suddenly came to a screeching halt as Dungy was forced to temporarily step away from his duties as head coach and focus all of his energy on being the spiritual leader of his heartbroken home.

At James's funeral, Dungy showed incredible poise and grace. Hundreds of family members, friends and associates (past and present) marveled at the peace that enveloped this grieving father. After the service, Les Steckel recalls a brief encounter with Dungy. The two embraced, and Dungy whispered into his friend's ear, "Nobody told me being a Christian would be this hard."

In his book *Quiet Strength: The Principles, Practices, and Priorities of a Winning Life*, Dungy admits later feeling as if his credibility as spokesman for All Pro Dads and supporter of other family-related organizations and ministries might be diminished because of what might be perceived as a parental failure. But his thoughts turned to the Bible story of Job—a man who was above reproach yet suffered through some of the most tragic sets of circumstances ever recorded.

As described in the biblical book, Satan asked God to remove His hand of protection from Job. It was Satan's belief that if Job were to suffer great misfortune, he would ultimately curse God. Satan proceeded to destroy everything of value in Job's life—his cattle, his properties, his health and even the lives of his children. Job certainly questioned God during this time of tribulation, but much to Satan's surprise and dismay, Job never turned his back on the Lord. Ultimately, God blessed Job for his faithfulness, not just by restoring his life, but also by giving him back twice as much as he had lost.

Dungy's personal loss may not have been quite as severe, but no doubt God has blessed him for staying faithful to the pursuit of integrity in the aftermath of such a devastating loss. The following season, in fact, Dungy experienced the pinnacle of success by leading the Colts to victory at Super Bowl XLI. In the process, he became the first African-American NFL coach to win the prestigious game.

And if Dungy wasn't already a beloved national figure, that single crowning achievement suddenly opened the floodgates for a whole new world of opportunity and influence.

"That's the great thing about winning," Irsay says. "It gives you a stage. It gives you a podium where you can have a chance to demonstrate the virtues that are important to you."

Dungy agrees, but he warns that such a platform can also be treacherous to occupy if its foundation isn't cemented by one's commitment to integrity. And it's not about protecting an individual's image or salvaging self-respect and pride. Dungy says that his desire to live out integrity before others is rooted in a significant calling on his life, a calling that is shared by all who claim Jesus as their savior.

"It is very important for a Christian athlete or a Christian coach to model integrity," Dungy says. "Because once I have gone out there and said, 'I am a Christian—here are the principles I live by,' if I do anything that undermines that, that's hurting the cause of Christ, that's hurting the gospel. It would be better off for me not to say anything. But once people know I am a Christian, I can't afford to walk differently than I believe because everybody is

going to see, especially in a high-profile position like a college coach, a high-school coach, a professional coach. Eyes are on you all the time.”

It’s a scenario that brings to mind another image of Job—when his so-called friends criticized him and searched for the sins and failures that must have led to such devastating circumstances. But Dungy knows well that judgment and opposition can come even during the good times. In November 2004, *Monday Night Football* aired a racy pre-game skit in which Terrell Owens (then with the Philadelphia Eagles) costarred with *Desperate Housewives* actress Nicollette Sheridan. Dungy made a point to publicly denounce the skit for its immoral content, but his complaint was taken out of context when he mentioned his disappointment in Owens for furthering negative stereotypes about black athletes and sexual conduct.

In those moments, Dungy has been able to take his lead from the example of Jesus Christ, who during His ministry on Earth was constantly challenged by the religious leaders of the day—in particular the Pharisees—for teachings that shook the foundations of popular belief.

But unlike Jesus, who was a sinless and perfect man, Dungy quickly owns up to the reality of his own imperfections. In those times when he does make a mistake, he is all too aware of the ramifications—especially for the follower of Christ.

“It’s really tough,” Dungy admits. “It’s tough on me when I don’t follow through with what I say I’m going to do or if I do something different or something that I know is wrong. It’s really hurtful, because I know that eventually that’s going to come to light and not only make my job tougher, but more than that, it’s going to cause people to question what Christianity is about.”

And because of this honest recognition of his own humanity, Dungy finds it much easier to forgive and forget the trespasses of others around him.

“I have a tendency to forgive people because that’s what Christ is all about,” Dungy says. “I’ve worked in situations where once you lose that integrity from your boss, you don’t really look at them the same way; and you’re still going to go out there and give it everything you’ve got, but something’s a little bit different, and I don’t want that to happen for me and the people I work with.”

As the punter for Indianapolis, Hunter Smith has seen firsthand the disciplined but gentle manner in which Dungy handles problems that arise within the team setting. It’s an approach that he says stands out in the rough-and-tumble world of the NFL.

“In a profession that is full of reactions, Coach Dungy has chosen to be a responder, and he responds as Christ would respond,” Smith says. “Jesus didn’t react to the people who came against Him; He responded to them in love, humility and justice. That’s how I feel Coach Dungy runs his family, his team and his life.”

Not surprisingly, Dungy’s strong convictions regarding forgiveness and compassion—even for those who have failed to maintain a high level of integrity—are based first and foremost on the example set by Christ. It is Christ’s unwavering consistency, described in all four Gospels, that challenges Dungy to live in a similar manner before his family, his team and the general public.

And despite the culture’s growing amorality and indifference, Dungy holds firm to his belief that character still matters and that following Jesus’ consistent model of integrity is the only way to maintain a clean reputation before men and, more importantly, before God.

“We have so many pressures coming at us that tempt us not to live up to our integrity,” Dungy says. “It’s so easy to say nowadays, ‘Well, everybody else is doing it,’ or to think it’s not important to be 100 percent accurate and honest and truthful because, after all, winning is the most important thing. We’re under that pressure, but you know what? My integrity is first, and it doesn’t matter if we win or not. I’m not going to let anything jeopardize my integrity.”

Go

1. Tony Dungy says that integrity is “what’s inside of you.” Describe a critical situation in which your character was brought to the forefront. Were you pleased or displeased by how you reacted? What did you learn from that situation?
2. Dungy has experienced the highest highs and the lowest lows, but people have always noted his consistent integrity. Do you find it easier to maintain integrity when things are going well or when things are going poorly? What are some specific challenges for maintaining a consistently high level of integrity?
3. Dungy says, “It’s tough on me when I don’t follow through with what I say I’m going to do or if I do something . . . that I know is wrong.” How do you feel when you break commitments or make mistakes? What kind of effects do those actions have on your integrity?
4. Read Hebrews 13:7-8. What advice is given in this passage? Who are some spiritual leaders that you look up to as an example of integrity? What can you learn about integrity through the life of Jesus? What does the last part of that verse tell you about the consistency of His character?
5. Francis Bacon once said that it’s “not what we profess but what we practice that gives us integrity.” What are some examples of talking the talk but not walking the walk? How important is it to practice integrity and not just profess it? How might the practice of integrity help with consistency?

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Hebrews 13



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