

Follow the Leader (Integrity - Chapter 3)

Ready:

For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding. He stores up success for the upright; He is a shield for those who live with integrity so that He may guard the paths of justice and protect the way of His loyal followers. Then you will understand righteousness, justice, and integrity—every good path. For wisdom will enter your mind, and knowledge will delight your heart.

Proverbs 2:6-10

Set

For centuries, mankind has debated this universal question: Are leaders born or are they made? In other words, do people come out of the womb with leadership skills built into their DNA? Or is it the process of life combined with the right environment and proper education and training that help people develop into leaders?

Depending on who is asked, the answer will likely be different, which most likely means that leaders arise in both ways. While some people are born with certain gifts and abilities that might give them an advantage when it comes to leadership, others are not so blessed at birth but instead work hard to overcome whatever obstacles and challenges stand in their way.

But no matter what the answer is, one thing is for certain: Integrity is something that *never* comes naturally. In Romans 3:23, the apostle Paul tells us that “everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard” (*NLT*). Jesus also pointed to this truth when He said, “For the gate is wide and the road is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who go through it” (Matthew 7:13-14).

The bottom line is that living a life of integrity goes against human nature. Just watch any toddler, and it’s plain to see that doing the right thing must be first taught and then learned and, most importantly, practiced and lived out. And even then, we must still guard ourselves against things that might challenge our integrity.

Les Steckel, for instance, says that one of the biggest hurdles people face in their quest to have integrity is the temptation to cave in to social pressures due to a natural desire to be accepted. As a former NFL football coach with over 30 years of experience at the collegiate and professional level, he often felt like a lonely outsider as he strived to live out the admonition found in 1 Peter 2:9, which in the *King James Version* refers to followers of Christ as “a peculiar people.”

“There’s not a lot of free time in coaching, but when there is free time, some coaches will go out and do some things that might challenge your integrity,” Steckel says. “If you don’t go

along with those social settings, you may get ostracized, but you feel like you don't have a relationship with them like the others do. . . . It's a life that's different. The Scripture says that we are to be peculiar. You certainly don't want to be perceived that way at times."

According to Steckel—who retired from coaching in 2005 to accept the position of president and CEO of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes—one of the biggest problems our nation is facing is an attack on the foundations of integrity. Basic moral values are being diminished, and many people believe that integrity is nothing more than a synonym for honesty. But Steckel believes it's so much more than that.

"I've always said integrity is weaving your private world together with your public world," he says. "I think a man's reputation is what other men think about him. A man's character is what God knows about him. So the reputation is from his public life, but character is from his private life. Only God knows our lives, and if we're all honest, we all have secret lives. It's being alert to that; and as you grow older, you become aware of that and you try to deal with it."

For Steckel, it's been a long journey that started in Whitehall, Pennsylvania. One of the most memorable lessons he ever learned took place while he was attending college at the University of Kansas. His family was hardly affluent, so to travel to and from school in Lawrence, Kansas, he would hitchhike.

"One day my mom came to me and said, 'When you get back to KU, you call us collect and you ask for yourself, and that way we'll know you arrived safely,'" Steckel recalls. "And my dad overheard it, and I thought he was going to blast both of us. He went ballistic and said, 'Don't you dare do that. Do you know how dishonest that is, cheating a phone company by fooling them like that?' I was petrified. So I knew that when I got back, I was going to have to pay 70 cents to make a three-minute call on the pay phone. That showed me that if you're going to be honest in the little things, you had better be honest in the big things."

Steckel's education intensified in 1968 when, following his graduation from Kansas, he joined the Marine Corps and then a year later served in Vietnam as an infantry officer. In 1972, he joined the Marine Corps Reserves and served part-time while balancing his coaching career before retiring as a colonel in 1999.

"Being a Marine and spending 30 years in the Marine Corps, I found that they have tremendous principles of discipline and work ethic and esprit de corps and teamwork and camaraderie," Steckel says. "And yet within the ranks, there are always people who, surprisingly, let you down. That's what is challenging for a Christian man who is trying to live a life of integrity but from time to time faces battles he can't handle. That's when pride becomes an issue; and when pride becomes an issue, we try to solve the problems and defeat the opponent by ourselves and not realize that, like the Scripture says [in 2 Corinthians 12:10], when we're weak, God is strong."

Early in his coaching career, Steckel spent time as an assistant at Colorado and Navy before making the leap to the NFL with San Francisco in 1978. He spent 1979 to 1983 as an assistant coach with the Minnesota Vikings before taking over as head coach in 1984. It was a short-lived experience, however, as he was fired following the Vikings' 3-13 season.

Up to that point, Steckel had already been involved in various ministries, including FCA for 12 years. But his understanding of what true integrity really should look like in the life of a Christian man didn't come into focus until 1985 when he joined head coach Raymond Berry's

staff at New England. In that first season, the Patriots reached their first ever Super Bowl, which they eventually lost to a legendary Chicago Bears team that featured head coach Mike Ditka and star athletes Walter Payton, Richard Dent, Mike Singletary and Jim McMahon.

Despite the hugely successful season, however, it was Berry's quiet, unassuming witness that made the strongest, most lasting impact on Steckel's life.

"Raymond was the greatest Christian model I ever saw," Steckel says. "One thing I knew for sure: When Raymond said something, it was the truth. You never questioned it—ever. When you have models like that in your life, then you want to emulate them. When I saw Raymond, he had qualities of Jesus that were lived out every day."

Steckel takes Berry's life as a model of Jesus, and he compares the qualities he observed in Berry to the "fruit of the spirit" that Paul wrote about in Galatians 5:22-23.

"I saw love from Raymond for his players, for his wife and for his children," he says. "He had the patience of Job, and it drove me crazy at times. He was so patient. I know at times he would share with me that he didn't have joy because of the challenges of being a head coach in the NFL. There wasn't a whole lot of joy, but joy comes despite the fact that there's pain. He showed me tremendous peace. I've never seen a guy in such stressful moments show such signs of peace. He was very gentle. I was so used to other head coaches who were fire and brimstone, and Raymond's talks were so gentle and his peace came through loud and clear. He was kind to everyone. Even the custodians and the parking-lot attendants—he knew those people by their first name. And that was a model for me, so whenever I've gone different places, I've tried to do the same.

"He was faithful," Steckel continues. "I can remember the day of Super Bowl XX. I had this great creative idea to do something in our game plan. I ran to his hotel room down the hall, and there he was in his robe reading his Bible the morning of the Super Bowl. I just thought, *Wow*. That made a real impact on me. And he showed great goodness to everyone."

In short, Berry modeled Christ to Steckel in a way that he had never quite seen before. And that up-close-and-personal viewpoint caused him to rethink the way he was modeling Christ to others around himself. But it wasn't until 1990 that Steckel fully understood what integrity was really all about. At that point, he found himself unemployed after a one-year stint at Brown University. In his autobiography, *One Yard Short: Turning Your Defeats into Victories*, he describes in detail a 13-month period when God shattered him emotionally and spiritually, and then methodically pieced his life back together again.

"Prior to my brokenness in 1990, I'm not sure how much modeling I was doing," Steckel says. "I was doing a lot of talking. Without a doubt, after my brokenness, not only did I want to be an FCA guy, I wanted to model Christ and let people know that's who I was following. And I found it to be a very lonely life. There were times that I would walk into the locker room and there would be an instant hush. It wasn't so much that they were talking about me. They were saying things that they knew they shouldn't be saying, and I happened to be around. It was tough at times, but I tried to live out my priorities. I think a man of integrity needs to know what his priorities are."

"I've always said that my faith came first, and that wasn't true prior to my brokenness," Steckel adds. "My god was football. It wasn't Jesus Christ. But after my brokenness, it certainly changed quickly."

To remind himself of his renewed commitment to Christ-centered priorities, he created a seven-point list that relies on a heavy dose of alliteration: (1) faith, (2) family, (3) football (since replaced by FCA), (4) friends, (5) fitness, (6) finances, and (7) fun.

"When I have to make a decision, I try to be a man of integrity, and I look at my priority list," Steckel says. "I ask myself, *Are you in fact living out your priorities?* and *Are you modeling Christ?*"

One of his new life verses is found in Proverbs 2:6-10, where Solomon talks about the kind of wisdom that comes only from God and was lived out through Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels. Steckel now had the original template that he needed to walk with divinely inspired integrity that will "guard the paths of justice and protect the way of [God's] loyal followers" (v. 8).

"We have this tremendous integrity modeled that we should try to emulate," Steckel says. "It's hard to emulate when you're not in the Word. So you don't really know who Jesus is except what people tell you. But the more you read about this not only great man and great prophet but living Son of God, you understand that integrity is a special character quality that so many people are labeled having. But do we have Christlike integrity? If you can't emulate the values you believe in, then you're obviously going to have a hard time getting other people to follow you along those lines."

Steckel spent two seasons at Colorado as an assistant coach under Promise Keepers' founder Bill McCartney before returning to the NFL, where he spent time at Denver, Houston, Tennessee, Tampa Bay and Buffalo. He was able to work alongside such solid Christian head coaches as Jeff Fisher and Tony Dungy. He also enjoyed the opportunity to coach in a second Super Bowl, but his Tennessee Titans lost to the St. Louis Rams in one of the NFL's most exciting championship games.

Still, with a greater commitment to integrity and more accountability support than ever before, Steckel absolutely understood—as he continues to understand today—that he would need to be ready for any attacks that might come against his moral character.

"As a Christian, every day we take the playing field or, to use a military term, we take the battlefield," Steckel says. "If I'm aware of the enemy and what the situation is and who the enemy is, I've got a chance of winning the battles. Every day I wake up, it says in Ephesians I need to put on the armor of Christ—the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, the belt of truth, the sandals of a peacemaker, the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit. If you get out of your bed or out of the rack, as they say in the Marine Corps, without putting on the armor of Christ, you're going to get beat every day."

Once that armor has been donned, Steckel says the believer must then be able to recognize who the enemy is and learn how to fight against the attacks that are certain to come. Those attacks come in three progressively dangerous forms. "First there's the secular world," Steckel says. "All you've got to do is listen to people talk, watch television, watch people's actions and the next thing you know the secular world is dictating to you how to act. That's not what God

wants us to do. Then there's selfishness. That's the biggest battle that we'll have all our lives, until we crawl into the grave. God talks about that all the time. I share that with my children. If you really want to have a fruitful, exciting Christian experience, you literally have to be totally empty of yourself and fill your life up with the spirit of the living God."

To combat those two enemies of integrity, Steckel recommends a healthy dose of Jesus' admonition in Luke 9:23: "If anyone wants to come with Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me."

But when Steckel brings up the third enemy of integrity, he admits that it sometimes draws some strange responses. "I know there are people out there who hear the term 'Satan' and think, *What are you making this up for?*" Steckel says. "But I can tell you that since I've been called to this position with FCA, I have been more aware of Satan than ever before in my life. There's really a battle. He does not want success to take place. And when he sees it, he just comes at you harder."

So when the temptation to cut corners or take the easy road makes its sly, sneaky entrance—and it assuredly will—Steckel reminds himself and advises others to consider Christ, the ultimate role model of integrity, and how He handled Himself in the face of death itself (see Matthew 26:39).

"There's no greater example of that than Jesus' going to the cross," Steckel says. "He knew that's what He was supposed to do. He had no desire to do it. He cried out to the Lord. But when it gets right down to it, you can have a clear conscience when you know you're living a life of integrity."

Go

1. Read Matthew 7:13-14. How would you compare the choice between the wide road and the narrow road to today's life choices? Why do you think so many take the path of destruction and so few take the road that leads to eternal life?
2. As an NFL coach, Les Steckel experienced the pressures to conform to societal norms that might not always line up with God's Word. Read 1 Peter 2:9. What does this verse tell you about the kind of life to which Christians have been called? What are some of the pressures that you have personally faced?
3. Steckel calls former New England Patriots head coach Raymond Berry "the greatest Christian model" he has ever known. Read Galatians 5:22-23. What are the "fruits of the spirit" in this passage? How might each one help you in your quest for a life of integrity?
4. When Steckel was offensive coordinator with the Tennessee Titans, he once made the choice to take responsibility for a poor decision. Can you describe a time when you were faced with a similar decision? How did you ultimately react? How did that action affect your decisions from that point forward?
5. Read Proverbs 2:6-10. Who does this passage suggest is the perfect example of integrity? What are some of God's attributes (as exemplified by Christ) by which you should live? Steckel says, "It's hard to emulate [Jesus' integrity] when you're not in the Word." Do you find this statement to be true in your life?

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Bible Reference:

1 Peter 2



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