

Living Against the Grain (Integrity - Chapter 5)

Ready:

Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

Romans 12:2

Set

Ask anyone associated with the American Basketball Association (ABA) or National Basketball Association (NBA) throughout the mid to late '70s and the early '80s about the hardest-working players in professional hoops and inevitably one name will come up time and again: Bobby Jones.

Legends such as Julius Erving, Charles Barkley, Larry Brown and Dean Smith—men who all played alongside or coached Jones—all give the same glowing praise of his blue-collar work ethic, his respect for the game and its rules, and his virtuous life of integrity.

One might imagine Jones as a kid shooting hundreds of free throws a day and then spending time reading the Bible after finishing his homework. That would make perfect sense, considering both the Christian walk and the hardworking attitude he displayed throughout a 12-year career that resulted in playing stints with the Denver Nuggets (1974 to 1978) and the Philadelphia 76ers (1978 to 1986). Plus, he was the son of Bob Jones and the younger brother of Kirby Jones, both of whom played college basketball at Oklahoma State University.

But strangely enough, Jones was never a stereotypical youth-group kid growing up. Furthermore, he was more like a couch potato than anything resembling the hustling, defensive specialist NBA fans grew to love and respect.

“I wasn’t a Christian, but I grew up in church,” Jones says. “They shared the gospel, and it went in one ear and out the other for me. It was my fault. It wasn’t anybody else’s. Really, I didn’t have an interest in those spiritual things when I was younger. There wasn’t much that interested me. I wasn’t interested in sports. I would come home from school and sit around and get a bottle of pop and watch TV. It wasn’t really until my dad pushed me to play sports that I started to develop those skills.”

Jones was born in Akron, Ohio, but his father's work as a store manager for Goodyear Tires forced the family to make several moves, including stops in Bryan, Texas; New Orleans, Louisiana; Goldsboro, North Carolina; and Winston-Salem, North Carolina. By the time his family landed in Charlotte, North Carolina, he and his siblings were entering their formative years. He didn't realize it at the time, but he later understood how his father's next decision was one of great integrity.

"My dad refused to take anymore promotions if it meant moving the family," Jones says. "He understood that living like gypsies wasn't the best for family stability. I feel like he sacrificed his career advancement for our family. I think that the integrity of knowing that your responsibility is for your family more than your job he demonstrated by his actions."

Another influential man of character in Jones's life was former University of North Carolina head coach Dean Smith. Still considered one of the greatest college basketball minds of all time, Smith made a lasting impression on Jones from day one.

"Before the season, Coach Smith brought every freshman into his office for a talk," Jones says. "He said to me, 'Bobby, are you the kind of player who would respond to me screaming at you to motivate you, or would you just like me to correct what you're doing wrong?' And I was stunned that he would ask my opinion. So I responded to him as honestly as I could. I said, 'Well, coach, I would just appreciate it if you would just tell me what I'm doing wrong. I don't think I'm motivated by someone yelling at me.' For the next four years, he never yelled at me. Now there were other guys who told him they needed a kick in the rear sometimes, and he would do that. He would verbally get on those guys more. But the fact that he asked the question and stuck to that for the next four years is something I'll never forget."

Jones knew what integrity was when he saw it. And he definitely saw it in the living examples of his father and his college coach. But it wasn't until he accepted Christ in 1973, right before his senior year in college, that the concept of God-inspired integrity started to infiltrate his heart.

"I can't pinpoint a time where I first realized that I needed to be a man of integrity," Jones says. "I did know that as a Christian, I was called to live my life in a way that would honor Him. My prayer when I got saved was two things: (1) Forgive me of my sins, so I can live in heaven with You forever, and (2) Show me how to live as a Christian in a world that views Christians in a cockeyed way. I really feel like He allowed me to do that. He allowed me to let my yes be yes and my no be no."

A year earlier, Jones was in Munich, Germany, playing on the U.S. Olympic basketball team. It was the year of the notorious 1972 Summer Olympics, when terrorists held 11 Israeli athletes hostage. By the end of the intense standoff, all of the Israeli athletes had been killed. Jones and his teammates assumed the Games would be cancelled, but that wasn't the case.

Instead, the heavily favored U.S. team competed and played its way into the gold-medal game against the former Soviet Union. With three seconds left, Doug Collins hit two free throws to give the Americans a one-point lead. Then a bizarre set of circumstances resulted in three opportunities for the Soviet team to inbound the ball, even though the referees attempted to end the game after the Soviet team's first failed attempt to score. The referees were overruled by then International Amateur Basketball Federation secretary general R. William Jones of Great Britain, who came out of the stands to single-handedly alter the

outcome of the game. The result was a 50 to 49 victory for the U.S.S.R.

“We as a team decided not to accept the silver medal,” Jones says. “I still stand by it. I believe it was the right decision. That was a point where the integrity of the people running the contest was really nonexistent. I think there is a time when you can protest, and you can react when things are not done according to law or rule or the right way; and I think we did that, and I think we did it appropriately.”

After his junior year, Jones was drafted by the ABA’s Carolina Cougars, but he decided to return to North Carolina for his senior season. In 1974, he was drafted by the NBA’s Houston Rockets. The Cougars moved to St. Louis and became known as the Spirit of St. Louis but still had the ABA rights to Jones. Coach Larry Brown was with the ABA’s Denver Nuggets and traded for him. Still needing to decide between the two competing leagues, Jones went with the former University of North Carolina coach and what he perceived as a better opportunity for immediate playing time.

At that point, Jones had only been a Christian for a year. Unsure of what challenges he was about to face, he was blessed with teammate Claude Terry, who had been a believer for several years. The two became good friends, roommates and Bible study partners. In the meantime, Jones quickly developed a reputation for playing the game with the highest level of integrity.

“For me it was always a situation where just because you’re playing a game doesn’t mean that as a Christian you can be dirty to a player or berate an official,” Jones says. “You don’t get a free pass because they’re your so-called opponent. The Lord tells us to be good to our enemies; and by doing that, you throw coals on their head. But that also goes back to where you want to be that living example of a Christian.”

Jones never got caught up in the common practice of trying to sell a call to the officials. He always felt like that was a cheap approach. Instead, Jones wanted to be a witness of integrity and faith to the referees and to his opponents. While he wasn’t perfect in his attempt, Jones certainly was unique in his philosophy; and as his career continued, the referees placed an unusual amount of trust in his well-documented character.

“It was one of the last years in my career, and we were playing down in San Antonio,” Jones recalls. “The ball goes out of bounds, and I’m trying to save it. I blocked out the official’s view, and he couldn’t tell whether it went off my fingertips or not. So he goes to the stands and retrieves the ball; and he says to me out of the side of his mouth, ‘Bobby, did you touch it?’ And I was just stunned. I get to play, and here I get to ref too. And I was honest with him; and I said, ‘No, I didn’t touch it.’ And he said, ‘Okay, red ball.’ So we got to inbound it right there.”

“Now, this is how the Lord works,” Jones continues. “Two weeks later, the exact same scenario takes place. It was the same ref, but this time it’s in Philly, and it’s right in front of our bench. The ball goes out of bounds again, and I’m going after it; and this time it does touch my fingertips. The ref comes up to me and says, ‘Bobby, did you touch it?’ And I said, ‘Yeah.’ And Coach [Billy] Cunningham was right there; and he kind of stamped his feet a little bit and says, ‘Bobby, that’s his job! Let him make the call!’ I didn’t respond to that, but I thought in my mind, *My integrity’s not worth a possession.*”

Jones's integrity was perhaps even more noteworthy off the court, where from day one he refused to cave in to the lifestyle of debauchery that many professional athletes live.

"I never wanted to be a part of that lifestyle," Jones says. "The Bible taught me to be faithful to my wife and to avoid the appearance of evil. I've always been a homebody anyway. In high school, my idea of a big night out was to play board games with some buddies of mine. I was never a partier anyway; and then when I started playing pro ball, my style of play was such that I was so tired at the end of the game, I didn't feel like going out anyway. That was a non-factor for me as far as temptation or a distraction."

In fact, Jones says the toughest part of his NBA career was the travel that didn't allow him to attend Sunday church services during the season. During his career with the Philadelphia 76ers (where he won the Sixth Man Award and was part of the NBA Championship team in 1983), he benefited from personal Bible study meetings with his pastor every Tuesday. Just like his commitment to intense practice and on-court hustle, Jones was equally attuned to the need for consistent times of prayer and devotion.

While Jones has been away from the pro game for over 20 years now, he can honestly say that not much has changed when it comes to integrity and our society. Some may argue that there has been a steady decline in moral behavior during that time, but Jones simply believes that the decline of personal ethics has been ongoing since the fall of man.

"The world is what it is," Jones says. "Satan does have control of it. But the Lord does provide a comforter—the Holy Spirit—to give us that power to do the things we should in the right way. That doesn't mean we're always going to be met with success. Negative things are going to happen. People are going to get fired. People are going to get berated. People are going to be made fun of because of their faith."

Even though he no longer enjoys the large platform that life in the NBA affords, Jones continues to do his part when it comes to telling others about Jesus and teaching people (in particular, teenagers) what it means to live a life of integrity.

In 2003, he joined forces with former NBA players Bart Kofoed and David Thompson to create 2XSALT, Inc. Inspired by Matthew 5:13 ("You are the salt of the earth"), this ministry runs sports camps, clinics, leagues and an after-school program that mentors students. He is also the volunteer coach at Myers Park High School in Charlotte.

Jones uses those opportunities to share his personal definition of integrity and a philosophy that comes from years of real-life experience.

"Integrity is doing the right thing and not considering the consequences," he says. "It's simple to say; and really once you start doing it, it's kind of simple to live, when you trust that God's got His best for you."

That truth is fortified by one of Jones's favorite Scriptures, Romans 12:2, a well-known passage that implores believers not to "be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God."

In a society where athletes are cheating to get a competitive advantage, politicians are bending rules to line their wallets, and corporations are ignoring basic ethics to pad the bottom

line, Jones says our value systems have been irreparably damaged to the point that a lot of people believe it's okay to backstab or cut corners in order to be successful.

But Jones's prayer for this nation's youth—the next generation of leaders—is that they follow the examples of such Bible heroes as Daniel and the three young Hebrew men who refused to give in to the world's way of doing things and instead chose to live pure and holy before God.

“Daniel and his three buddies just lived their lives according to the way they knew they should live it, not according to their circumstances,” Jones says. “That made it simple for them to make their decisions. It didn't make the decisions very pleasant, I'm sure at the time, but it gave them their groundwork and God's standard for their life. Those are the examples that we have. We can choose to follow those examples, or we can say, ‘Hey look, everyone else is doing it. Why not?’”

Jones also hopes that young people will accept a challenge similar to the one given by Mordecai to Esther, the queen and divinely appointed rescuer of her people. In Esther 4:14, Mordecai suggested that she had been brought “to the kingdom for such a time as this.”

“We've been placed where we are for a reason,” Jones says. “That reason is to honor the Lord and to stand in the gap where there is a lack of integrity or where there is a lack of honesty or a lack of boldness for the gospel. I think a lot of kids want to be the superstar, but that's just not the way it is. I mean, half of my career, I came off the bench. It didn't really matter to me if I started a game. But there's a pride factor in there where we tend to gravitate to the slickest-talking pastor or the most popular kid in school, and that becomes our standard. Well, that's very temporary; and Scripture is there for a reason, and it has been proven true over thousands of years.”

Go

1. Bobby Jones gives two personal examples of integrity: his father and Coach Dean Smith. How do those two examples go against the grain of the way today's society thinks?
2. When Jones began his career as a professional basketball player, he was a brand-new Christian. How do you think having an established believer like Claude Terry as a teammate helped him? How important is accountability and Christian fellowship in your walk? How does it help you maintain your integrity?
3. Read Romans 12:2. What do you think it means to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind”? What are some tools that might help you accomplish that task? According to the Scripture, what is one tangible benefit that comes with a renewed, Christlike mind?
4. Jones refers to Daniel, the three young Hebrew men, and Esther as biblical examples of people who lived with integrity under difficult circumstances. Who are some modern-day examples of integrity who inspire you? Read Esther 4:14. How do you interpret the phrase “for such a time as this”? For what purpose do you think God might be calling you to live a life of integrity?

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