

Trial by Fire (Integrity - Chapter 9)

Ready:

And not only that, but we also rejoice in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope.

Romans 5:3-4

Set

When Laura Wilkinson says she used to be a very quiet and shy person, it's a little hard to believe. That's because these days, the outgoing, personable world-class diver is one of sport's most outspoken Christian athletes.

Wilkinson is also very articulate when it comes to matters of faith. She strives to live with integrity in an effort to maintain solid footing on the broad platform that worldwide notoriety as an Olympic gold medalist has afforded her.

"I've had to learn to speak up for God in my life," Wilkinson says. "I've realized that if He has a presence in my heart, He needs to have a presence in everything. If He's really the center of my life, He's really going to be involved in everything."

The foundation for Wilkinson's faith was poured early in her life. Growing up in the Houston suburb of Spring, Texas (she now resides in The Woodlands), she cites her parents, Ed and Linda Wilkinson, as her first examples of integrity and as the driving force behind her initial interest in a relationship with God.

"I became a Christian at a very young age," Wilkinson says. "I was eight years old, and it just made sense. I was like, *Why wouldn't people do this?* I totally got it, and I was really excited about God. Then I entered my freshman year of high school, and I switched churches. I started going to a youth group with one of my friends, and I started to see that some of the kids would be one way at church, and then we'd go to McDonald's or something like that after church, and they would be totally different. I just felt really uncomfortable, and I didn't know how to handle it. So I just stopped going, which is the complete opposite of what I should have done. At that point, I got confused, so I walked away from it, but then I ended up becoming just like them."

At the end of her freshman year in high school, when she was 15, Wilkinson discovered diving. She had actually started her competitive career as a seven-year-old gymnast, but a growth spurt made her realize she "wasn't going to be the next Mary Lou Retton." Her gymnastics background did, however, help speed up her transition to the pool, and within two years she was competing on the U.S. national team. That same year, Wilkinson won a bronze

medal at the 1995 World Cup in the platform synchro event with partner Patty Armstrong.

By the time she graduated from high school and arrived at the University of Texas at Austin, where she had been offered an athletic scholarship for her diving skills, she was already a rising star within the American diving community. Wilkinson solidified that fact by winning NCAA titles in 1997 and 1999 and eight All-American honors. Along the way, she continued a streak of appearances on the national team that has stretched for 13 consecutive years and counting.

But while Wilkinson was emerging as the sport's next big thing, her spiritual life was sinking deeper every day. She knew she wasn't living for God anymore and was—with painful futility—trying desperately to call her own shots. Then, like the sting that comes from a badly missed dive, she was jarred back to her senses.

“My sophomore year in college, I realized that me being in control of my life just made a mess of things,” Wilkinson says. “I knew that I needed God back. I didn't hit rock bottom, but it felt like it. So I totally recommitted my life, and it's just been different ever since.”

Thanks to the example set by her parents, Wilkinson already had a working knowledge of what biblical, Christ-centered integrity looked like. She knew that some of the biggest keys to keeping integrity intact were attitude, perspective and focus. As Wilkinson grew stronger in her faith as a young adult, she also understood that it also required some sacrifices.

“There are definitely friends who I don't see as much anymore that I would like to,” she says. “We don't really believe in the same stuff, so we don't really hang out as much anymore. That's kind of hard sometimes, but as much as you try to be an example to them, sometimes that really turns them off, or it affects you because you'll want to go out and do things that you shouldn't be doing. It's affected some friendships, which is tough. But I've also made new ones, which is wonderful.”

For Wilkinson, the benefit of living a life with integrity is first and foremost the fact that it pleases God with the offering of obedience. She has also received an immeasurable, spiritual peace. And any emotional holes that may have been left after the loss of a friend or two have been replaced by her rewarding marriage to Eriek Hulseman.

Of course, Wilkinson has likewise been blessed with athletic success that arguably makes her the most decorated female diver in U.S. history. Her collective accomplishments include over 30 major national and international gold medals. Wilkinson is also the first woman of any nationality to win platform gold medals at the World Championship (2005), the World Cup (2004) and the Olympics (2000), not to mention her gold-medal performance at the 1998 Goodwill Games.

With that kind of hardware, it would be easy to let one's guard down when it comes to maintaining a high level of integrity. But not for Wilkinson, who says her place in the spotlight makes it even that much more important that she abide by the same standards in public and in private. And that requires a healthy dose of internal honesty.

“I think being honest with yourself is like being the same you everywhere you go,” Wilkinson says. “You can hide from yourself too. It's easy to tell yourself how great you are and blame all of your problems on someone else. But when you can take responsibility for your bad decisions, it will help you make the right decision the next time. You do need to be honest with

yourself, and it's not easy all the time. It's just our human nature to pat ourselves on the back and think we're great, but it's not about us. We need to be making the decisions that God wants us to make."

Wilkinson's discussion of honesty and integrity reminds her of the fictional story that has become a staple of mass emails across the Internet. The tale describes a police officer who pulls over a woman for reckless driving. He notices several bumper stickers on the car that lead him to believe the car belongs to a person of faith. When the officer arrives at the window, he says to the woman, "This car obviously belongs to a Christian, so it must be stolen. Please step out of the vehicle."

It's a sad illustration of how many believers give the rest of the world a bad impression of what it means to follow Jesus. Wilkinson tries diligently to avoid becoming more than a punch line in the way that she lives her own life.

"If I'm advertising or if I'm saying that I'm a Christian and I represent Christ, I need to really represent Him in everything," she says. "I think that goes along with living it out in every aspect of your life—not being a different person to appease people at school or at work. You need to be the same person representing the same God everywhere you go."

But Wilkinson's most educational lessons on the subject of integrity have come from firsthand experiences that have tried her physically, emotionally and spiritually. During her career, she has suffered broken bones on three occasions and has dealt with three surgeries (only one of which was related to a broken bone).

It was an injury that took place just months before the 2000 U.S. Olympic trials that nearly pushed Wilkinson over the edge. She broke three metatarsals in her right foot, and the decision she made to leave school that year in order to pursue Olympic glory seemed like the wrong choice. Even prior to the injury, Wilkinson says her dream was getting fuzzy; she was losing her focus. But it didn't take long for her to realize how much she enjoyed diving and how badly she wanted to compete in Sydney, Australia.

"Breaking my foot was such a blessing in disguise," Wilkinson says. "When I first broke it, I was doing a thing with NBC where I was calling in and I would leave these messages. It was kind of like a voice-mail diary, and they were posting it. My husband saved them and put them all together in a song for me. I remember calling in the day after I broke my foot; and I said something like, 'This is really rough, and it hurts and it's tough, and I don't know what's going to happen, but I know that there's a silver lining in every dark cloud. When the clouds clear out, there will be rainbows.' I just knew that it wasn't the end."

For the next three months, Wilkinson fought through her challenging circumstance by using unconventional training methods. She would hop up the ladder to the 10-meter platform and sit on the edge in her street clothes. Wilkinson visualized her dives while exercising the accompanying arm motions. She also watched hours of video tape and concentrated on the mental side of diving.

Wilkinson adjusted her launch style by starting from a handstand position. This allowed her to avoid using that tender right foot while taking advantage of her gymnastics background. At the Olympic trials, she stunned the judges and the crowd by claiming a 40-point victory over the second-place competitor. Wilkinson then made a stunning comeback at the Olympics where she won the gold medal despite falling to fifth place after the first five dives.

Still unsure which victory was more special—the Olympics or the Olympic trials—Wilkinson does know one thing for sure: The perseverance she displayed throughout the entire process built her character in a way nothing else before ever had. Perhaps that's why one of her favorite Scriptures is Romans 5:3-4, in which the apostle Paul tells us that “we also rejoice in our afflictions, because we know that affliction produces endurance, endurance produces proven character, and proven character produces hope.”

“I've had quite a few traumatic experiences in my life,” Wilkinson says. “It helps knowing that God has made me to persevere and to keep going, even when things are difficult. I just need to trust Him. If I can't see beyond that big obstacle, God can see beyond it, and He's going to get me there. We might go right through the obstacle, or we might go around it, but I need to trust Him to get me there.”

Wilkinson's story is much like the powerful passage of Scripture found in Malachi 3. In those prophetic verses, the writer foretells Jesus Christ's first appearance on Earth. In verse 2, Malachi compares the Savior to “a refiner's fire.” In verse 3, he goes on to tell us how Jesus “will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver.”

Malachi uses the analogy of the purification process for fine metals to explain the sanctification, or refining, process that Christians must go through in order to become holy and acceptable before God. In Old Testament times, ore was placed in a crucible and heated at incredibly high temperatures. The heat caused the metal to separate from what was nonmetal, called “dross,” which then floated to the top. This was drained off, leaving nearly pure metal.

For Wilkinson, it was the foot injury that ultimately took her through the same kind of purification and refining process that Malachi wrote about more than 2,000 years ago. “It's important to learn in those circumstances to thank God for the circumstances that maybe you don't appreciate,” Wilkinson says. “For instance, when I broke my foot, I said to God, ‘I know You have a plan for this, so I want to thank You for this and be joyful in this, even though it's painful and even though it's difficult. This is my fire. You're putting me through the fire, and You're going to mold me and make me into what I want to be.’ To have the integrity to be able to thank Him in those moments is what I've been learning how to do.”

When Wilkinson has a chance to speak to people—young and old alike—she always makes sure to tell them that a life of integrity isn't about a list of dos and don'ts that will take the fun out of life. Instead, she believes that rejecting the things of this world and accepting the things that come from heaven can result in “an awesome, adventurous life.”

“Trusting God with my life and letting Him take me through storms and helping me climb up and down mountains has been more adventurous than any drug trip or any other worldly thing you can find,” Wilkinson says. “When you actually can trust God fully and say yes to whatever He wants you to do and you follow Him, then that is an awesome adventure. That is more fulfilling than any worldly stuff you can get into. That other stuff isn't really living. It's like

running away from life or avoiding things instead of really living.”

There’s no denying that Wilkinson has done some pretty spectacular things in her life thus far. Just by virtue of winning an Olympic gold medal, she has secured a place in history that can never be erased. But when it comes to spiritual matters such as integrity, Wilkinson is quick to point out just how ordinary and normal she is compared to the rest of us.

“I’m really no different from anyone else,” she says. “I’ve screwed up big time in the past. I have to make a choice to get up every day and trust God and to have faith in Him and to choose His way and not just mine. That’s what I want people to know. You don’t just wake up one day and suddenly become this perfect person, and life is great and the sun is always shining. You’re still a normal person. You’ve just chosen God’s path, and you still have to choose that daily. It’s not just choosing eternal life and then doing whatever you want. That’s not how it is. You still have to make that choice every day.

“It’s a choice that anyone can make,” Wilkinson concludes. “You don’t have to get cleaned up to go to God. He will take you just as you are. I think that’s the biggest stumbling block that some people have. They know they might have to change, and that scares them. But go to God as you are, and He will clean you up and help you change, because you can’t do that on your own.”

Go

1. According to Laura Wilkinson, choosing to pursue biblical integrity sometimes means making sacrifices. In her case, this meant giving up some unhealthy friendships. What are some sacrifices you have made for the sake of integrity? What have been some of the benefits that have accompanied those sacrifices?
2. Wilkinson says, “It’s just our human nature to pat ourselves on the back and think we’re great, but it’s not about us.” When it comes to integrity, how important is it for you to be honest with yourself? What are some of the dangers of not being honest with yourself? What are some ways you can avoid self-deception?
3. Wilkinson says, “If I’m saying that I’m a Christian and I represent Christ, I need to really represent Him in everything.” What are some of the areas of your life in which you are sometimes tempted to act differently? How can these contradictions, if exposed, impact your ability to share the gospel with others?
4. Read Romans 5:3-4. In what ways does affliction produce endurance? How does endurance produce proven character? What is the relationship between proven character and hope? Can you relate a story in which these principles have manifested in your life?
5. Read Malachi 3:2-4. What are some things in your life that the refiner’s fire might represent? How might troubling circumstances help purify your integrity? How can you be thankful and even joyful during hard times?

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Romans 5



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