

Witness Protection (Integrity - Chapter 2)

Ready:

Likewise, encourage the young men to be sensible about everything. Set an example of good works yourself, with integrity and dignity in your teaching. Your message is to be sound beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be ashamed, having nothing bad to say about us. Titus 2:6-8

Set

For individuals striving to live with integrity, honesty is always the best policy. But some will argue that oftentimes it's better to say nothing rather than allow the harsh truth to be spoken. Shaun Alexander is one of those people who err on the side of caution when it comes to the words he speaks.

But that wasn't always the case for the Seattle Seahawks' running back. In fact, it wasn't long ago that Alexander would answer every media question with brutal honesty, no matter what kind of fallout his response might cause.

"I'm a blunt person," Alexander admits. "I try not to beat around the bush; and when it comes to me, I'm just really open. I don't try to hide anything, because I think as soon as you hide something, it can be dangerous for anybody else. I just think that lying is a form of wickedness. I never want to get into that or half-truths. Those can be very dangerous things. That's why I'm blunt about things that I'm doing."

In 2004, Alexander learned a hard lesson about honesty. After the final game of the season against Atlanta, he finished one yard shy of the NFL rushing title but easily could have reached the mark had he been given one last attempt.

Afterwards, a reporter asked him this loaded question: "How would you feel if Coach [Mike] Holmgren knew you were only one yard short and didn't give you the ball?"

To that, Alexander responded, "Oh man, I would feel like I was stabbed in the back."

The comment, according to Alexander, was severely blown out of proportion, and "suddenly that turned into something crazy."

The next thing he knew, the media was reporting a riff between Alexander and Holmgren, even though the two had previously enjoyed a close relationship (both are committed Christians) in Seattle—a relationship that remains strong to this day. Alexander would later explain that he never really believed Holmgren would purposely deny him the title, but the usually verbose Pro Bowl back made the decision to be more careful with his words and, if necessary, even resort to saying, "No comment," in a situation where honesty might not be

understood or well received.

“Satan’s biggest scheme is always to get the world to view you one way when you’re really something else,” Alexander says. “If you take the one-yard-short incident, then that makes it look like I’m talking about stats and trying to get the extra yard and winning awards. In reality, for me, I was talking about my relationship with Coach Holmgren. That was one of those things where God says we should pay attention and beware of the things you do and say. That’s all throughout the Bible.”

The situation initially proved difficult for Alexander, who has spent most of his life pursuing integrity. Even from a very early age, he has understood the meaning of good, moral character—thanks to the strong influence of his mother, who he speaks glowingly of throughout the pages of his 2006 autobiography, *Touchdown Alexander*.

“I’m from Kentucky, so I have one of those mommas that forced you to live a life that wasn’t going to embarrass your family,” Alexander jokes. “I didn’t understand what it meant to embarrass God or not living to a Godly standard until later. But there was an uncompromising plan for life that we had to live by. You weren’t cheating on your tests. You weren’t stealing. Those things were instilled in me by my mom.”

Later on in life, Alexander says he was blessed to have several people who bolstered the example that was set by his mother. His athletic career was especially ripe with true models of integrity and Godly character.

“I had some great high-school coaches that were men of integrity,” Alexander says. “I think about my quarterback coach, Paul Gray, who actually worked for FCA. I value marriage a lot, and my parents got divorced when I was in sixth grade. So I just valued the way he looked at his wife compared to other women that were around. Those were the things I noticed.”

At the University of Alabama, Alexander again was surrounded by coaches who showed him it was possible to be successful in sports and still maintain a high level of integrity. He also recalls husband and wife Lee and Lucy Sellers, from Tuscaloosa, who were involved in his Sunday School class. These surrogate parents helped him start the process of building a bridge between moral character and biblical principles.

“They were a hard-working family of integrity,” Alexander says. “Everything was about taking the steps to get closer to God. You could see in their children that it’s the way they lived. Those people of integrity whom I just admired.”

According to Alexander, his early pursuit of integrity was based on a basic desire to be a decent, moral person. He had a form of integrity in him but didn’t understand that there was a calling attached to those who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior. Still, as a youngster, there was something different about him that pushed him away from typical childhood behaviors.

“You know, it’s funny,” Alexander recalls. “I tell everybody that I was saved at the age of 10. I remember I wanted to accept Jesus. I wanted to be different. I wanted to know about this Jesus Christ and live for Him. So I had some things in me. I remember being in a little penny store with some kids; and everybody was saying, ‘Hey, let’s go steal some jawbreakers.’ And just couldn’t do it. I didn’t know that I had a spirit of integrity. But there were just things in me that were like that.”

That same attitude carried over into high school and college, where, despite being a popular athlete, Alexander committed to a life of purity. He saved himself until marriage, but admits it wasn’t until later in his college career that he put such acts of integrity into their proper spiritual context.

“The summer before my junior year in college was the first year I worked at an FCA camp,” Alexander remembers. “Before that, I didn’t know that there were other guys out there like me. So I met some kids from all over the country, and we talked about integrity issues: How far is too far with drinking? How far is too far with girls? How far is too far with your language?”

Those kinds of intense discussions ultimately led Alexander to 1 Peter 1:15-16, which showed him that a call to holy living is an important part of following Jesus.

“And then the question about integrity isn’t, ‘How far is too far?’” Alexander says. “It’s ‘Why not holy? Why not purity? Why not 100 percent?’ When you start looking at it that way, it’s like, ‘Whoa!’ Because I was always a good kid growing up. No cussing. No drinking. No sex. But it never hit me that if God said, ‘Be holy, because I’m holy,’ then there is no line. There is no, ‘How far is too far?’

“So there was a switch in my thinking, even though the grace of God never allowed me to go that direction. Yeah, there were temptations around me. I was an All-American as a freshman. But it just wasn’t in me to say, ‘Oh, I’m standing up for God because this is the godly way to do it.’ I was more like, ‘I just don’t do that.’ I guess the integrity factor was covered by God’s grace, and it still is. But it wasn’t until that junior year when I realized God had called me to be like this, and then I accepted the calling to be a servant. That’s when I called Him my Lord. That’s when my relationship with God went to another level.”

When Alexander joined the NFL fraternity in 2000, he wasn’t an instant star. In fact, it wasn’t until starting running back Ricky Watters suffered injuries in 2001 that Alexander received his first crack at serious playing time. After a breakout season in 2004, he followed up with the greatest statistical year of his career in 2005. Alexander broke the single-season total touchdown record (28) and was named the 2005 NFL MVP. The Seahawks also reached Super Bowl XL, where they lost to the Pittsburgh Steelers.

But more important than the individual kudos, team successes and astronomical salary increases, Alexander says it’s the platform for his faith in Jesus that means the most to him. He has used his NFL fame as a way to reach young people—particularly teenage guys. Alexander spends time mentoring kids and teaching them the truths behind such Scriptures as Joshua 1:7, which reminds us to “be strong and very courageous”; 2 Timothy 5:2, which teaches young men to treat “the younger women as sisters”; and Titus 2:6-7, which encourages “young men to be sensible about everything.”

“Integrity is such a straight shot,” Alexander says. “There’s no counterfeit. There’s no two

ways of doing it. I always tell anyone who's listening, 'You can't say, "That's my one little sin," when it comes to integrity, because integrity crosses all boundaries. If you have integrity for God, that's who you are. You're a man of integrity.'"

Alexander doesn't shy away from tough issues either. One of his favorite Scriptures is James 2:10-11: "For whoever keeps the entire law, yet fails in one point, is guilty of [breaking it] all. For He who said, 'Do no commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' So if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you are a lawbreaker."

That Scripture reminds Alexander of an analogy that he and his cousin Dan Brown used frequently while working at FCA camps in college.

"It doesn't matter how big the jug of water is or how small the cup of water is," Alexander says. "It only takes a little bit of water to make the whole thing mud. Integrity says, 'I'm not going to accept a pinch of that dirt.' Every now and then we all get dirty because we're selfish, sinful people, but when you start accepting pinches of dirt, it really gets bad."

And then there are those moments, like the aforementioned one-yard-short incident, when people look for chinks in the armor and attempt to call one's integrity into question. There was perhaps no better example of this than the punishment Alexander endured throughout the 2007 season at the hands of the fans and the media. He broke his wrist in the first game of the regular season, and by the midway point was also suffering from bruised ribs, a faulty knee and back problems. He missed three games and produced the lowest statistical totals since his rookie season in 2000, when he was a backup. Alexander took shots from the media and was even jeered by his own fans. Of course, those same fans would cheer when he made a big play or scored a touchdown, proving just how double-minded and fickle they can be. But strangely, Alexander says it was never as bad as it looked on the surface.

"The boat was rocking that year," Alexander says. "It was craziness. People were booing and acting crazy. But spiritually, this was one of the most refreshing years I've ever had. I was at such a place of peace. I knew I couldn't do the things that I was used to being able to do physically. One whole side of my body was out. So for me it was like, 'God, I can't do this anymore.' And He was like, 'Well, if you no longer care about your stats, go have fun with Me.' And I was like, 'Wow! I can do that? I can play the game and not have to get 100 yards and two touchdowns and not feeling like I let somebody down?' I was freed up this year. It was a very blessed and freeing year for me."

It was also another learning experience for Alexander because he began to understand that it's not always up to us to defend our integrity. That's not to say there are never times believers should stand up for themselves, especially in those times when the attacks can hurt the credibility of their witness. But ultimately, it's up to God to protect His people from all accusations and all forms of slander.

"People are going to believe what they want to believe," Alexander says. "At the end of the day, I walk into my house with my family, and I pull them all closer to God; and there's joy in our house and there's peace in our house. I walk into my church. There's joy in my church and there's peace in our church. With the boys I mentor, there's joy and there's peace. Even on my team, there's joy and peace on my team."

Wherever Alexander has a strong influence on others—with his team, with his family, with the young men he mentors, or with the general public—one of the most important messages he

shares deals with protecting integrity and guarding against things that might bring on the judgment of this world. That means being honest with oneself and avoiding the obvious pitfalls that vary from person to person.

“Everybody has to be real with themselves,” Alexander says. “Guys are always like, ‘Shaun, you’re just so strong not to sleep with any of those girls in college.’ But honestly, I’m not that strong. I just kept myself away from all of that. I’m probably weaker than most of those guys. But I was real with myself. I knew that if I went out, something was going to happen. To be a Christian, you have to be real with yourself, but a lot of times guys aren’t.”

But perhaps most importantly in this day and age of moral ambiguity and relative integrity, Alexander says everyone needs to know what to do when they make mistakes and have a lapse in their moral character. After all, there is no such thing as the perfect person.

“I always remind people that all of us fall short,” Alexander says. “None of us is really good enough for God. If you’re emotionally bruised from sinning, that’s a good thing. I always worry about the ones that love Jesus; but when they sin, they just say, ‘Well, He’s going to forgive me.’ There’s no bruising there. I’m not saying you should feel convicted to the point where you want to jump off a building, but there should be this soreness that you let the King of kings down.”

Alexander is careful to temper those words with the message of mercy and grace that pervades the Bible and is especially prominent throughout the Gospels of Jesus Christ. He is quick to quote 1 Peter 4:8, which reminds us that “love covers a multitude of sins,” and John 12:47, in which Jesus tells us, “For I did not come to judge the world but to save the world.”

“At the end of the day, most people who don’t know Jesus, they have some form of insecurity or depression or anger that they can’t fix,” Alexander says. “So I’m like, ‘Let God save you, heal you, free you from those things.’ That’s what’s awesome about God. With Him, you can have a life of peace.”

Go

1. Shaun Alexander shared a story in which a candid response allowed an opening for his integrity to be questioned. Can you describe other situations where keeping quiet on an issue might be more appropriate than speaking your mind? Would you define that action as a lack of honesty or the use of wisdom?
2. Read 1 Peter 1:13-16. What advice does Peter give about maintaining integrity in verses 13-14? Alexander says that verses 15-16 challenged him to a higher level of integrity. What can you find in those verses that might inspire you to likewise be challenged? In what ways can you “be holy” as Jesus is holy?
3. Read Titus 2:6-8. What do you think Paul means when he encourages Titus to “be sensible about everything”? What do you think is the importance of setting a good example and having a message that is “sound beyond reproach”?
4. Alexander says, “Every now and then we all get dirty because we’re selfish, sinful people, but when you start accepting pinches of dirt, it really gets bad.” How does that analogy translate into your quest for integrity? Read James 2:10-11. What does this Scripture tell you about the nature of sin and its effect on your character?
5. Read 1 Peter 4:8 and John 12:47. What do those Scriptures tell you about the power of God’s grace in relation to sin? How do those truths help you deal with the times that you fall short of God’s glory?

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Bible Reference:

1 Peter 4



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