

The Road Less Traveled (Integrity - Chapter 8)

Ready:

Enter through the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the road is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who go through it. How narrow is the gate and difficult the road that leads to life, and few find it.

Matthew 7:13-14

Set

For Lorenzo Romar, integrity is one of the simplest concepts he's ever learned—so simple, it only takes a brief, pondering pause followed by a concisely spoken sentence for him to explain.

"A person with integrity consistently does the right thing," he matter-of-factly states.

As the University of Washington men's basketball coach, Romar has provided a walking, talking example of integrity to the young athletes that don the Huskies' uniform year in and year out.

Take for example the coach's no-swearing policy. During practices and games, players are not allowed to use any form of profanity. If they do, the penalty is a healthy number of laps around the court. Romar says it's not even necessarily a spiritual matter but rather an issue of self-control and class.

"What I found is that guys will not use cuss words around me off the court, but I never told them that," Romar says. "Off the court I've told them, 'That's your life. But on the court when people are watching how we conduct ourselves, that's disrespectful to some and offends some. So stay away from it.'"

Romar's strong disciplinarian style is in sharp contrast to much of what he experienced growing up in Compton—the rough-and-tumble Los Angeles community popularized within hip-hop culture. All around him were signs of family breakdown, but Romar—who says he wouldn't want to have grown up anywhere else—is thankful for his parents, who raised him in a household built on integrity.

"There was crime and some other things that weren't good, but I did my best to stay away from those things," Romar says. "I couldn't come home if I did something I had no business doing. I also had a desire to be something special in this sport, and I knew that the other peripheral things could get me off track, so there was no interest in them at all."

Romar fell in love with basketball around the age of 10. His passion was strong enough to drive a self-described average talent all the way from street ball to the NBA. But along the

way, the wild playground player needed some taming. That, Romar says, happened at Cerritos Community College and then the University of Washington, where he had a chance to play for the legendary Marv Harshman.

“My junior-college coaches began the process,” Romar says. “It was the first time I had really been coached in my life. Then Marv Harshman was able to help me see the more fundamentally sound parts of the game. When I did decide I wanted to get into coaching, one of things I thought about was how much of an impact a coach could have on his players.”

Romar’s college coaches also provided a template for integrity that would stick with him for years to come. And while the young athlete had not yet committed his life to Christ, he knew by the examples of his parents and coaches that there was something more to living right than just abiding by the laws of the land.

“If I’m a male and I’m 22 years old and I’m in and out of different ladies’ beds, partying from time to time, then as far as the world would be concerned, they would say you’re just being a man,” Romar says. “Now if I were to rob or steal, then I would have crossed the line. But God’s standard is different. God wants us to be pure until marriage. That’s just one example. To hold a grudge or to seek revenge, the world would say, ‘Yep, I can’t blame him for that. They shouldn’t have crossed him.’ But God says, ‘Vengeance is mine’ and Jesus talked about forgiveness. So there are two different standards, and you can have a worldly standard and still be looked upon as a man of integrity. I think there is a difference, and I probably fit that mold before I became a Christian. I knew what I was doing behind closed doors, but others didn’t. And if they did know, they’d say, ‘Well, there’s nothing wrong with that. Everybody does that.’”

While Romar admits he struggled with Christ-centered integrity off the court, his relentless work ethic paved the way for significant success on the court. As a senior, he was named team captain; and during both his years at Washington, he was the recipient of the team’s Most Inspirational Award.

Romar’s unique combination of desire, discipline and sheer determination ultimately afforded him the opportunity to play in the NBA, where in 1980 he was drafted in the seventh round by Golden State. He spent his first three seasons with the Warriors and another season split between the Milwaukee Bucks and the Detroit Pistons. During that time, he was surrounded by greatness, including head coach Don Nelson and such perennial All-Stars as Bernard King and Sidney Moncrief. It was a surreal existence that left him feeling like a kid in a candy store.

But the giddiness that occasionally overcame Romar as a rookie quickly wore off, and he suddenly began to realize that something was missing in his life. There was a void in his heart that the NBA experience could never truly fill.

“I had always believed in God and had always wanted to have a relationship with God, but I just didn’t know how to do it,” Romar says. “I was raised in a church where the only time they would open the Bible was when the minister would open it himself and read from some already-picked-out Scriptures. He’d talk for 10 minutes about the gospel, and that was it. And that was fine at the time; but there came a point where I just felt like, *What would happen if I died? There’s got to be more.*”

Romar’s quest was spurred by a friend who challenged him to start reading the Bible and exploring its truths for himself. He was encouraged to make up his own mind and stop relying

on what he had heard others preach and teach. On September 10, 1983, Romar and his wife, Leona, both accepted Christ, thanks in part to the personal revelations that awaited him at the end of the soul-searching process.

“I realized that I was trying to be right with God by doing good works, by being a good person,” Romar says. “I read [in the Bible] that [doing good works] didn’t matter. That didn’t make you have a relationship with the Lord, because we couldn’t be good enough. We’ll always fall short.”

While Romar’s new life in Christ was just beginning, his NBA career was less than two years from coming to a close. That’s not to say his playing days were over. In fact, while trying out for the Indiana Pacers prior to the 1985-86 season, he was contacted by Athletes in Action, the athletic division of Campus Crusade for Christ. At the time, AIA had a long-standing basketball tradition in which former college players would travel during the collegiate preseason to play exhibitions against major universities all across the country. Romar was attracted to AIA while still in high school and sent them a tape in the hope of playing for them one day.

“I’d love to say I turned the NBA down to play with AIA, but I didn’t,” Romar admits. “I was in a situation where I didn’t know if I was going to make a team. I had a tryout, but I didn’t know if I was going to make it. I had just become a Christian; and this was an opportunity to tell thousands about my faith in Jesus Christ and still be involved in the game, so I went for it.”

Romar spent seven seasons with AIA and started in 224 of 233 games. In 1992 (and at the age of 34), he scored 45 points against Michigan’s famous Fab Five freshmen—a group that featured Chris Webber, Juwan Howard and Jalen Rose—and went on to play in the NCAA championship game later that year. Romar concluded his playing career as AIA’s record holder in single-game points (54), single-game assists (21) and all-time assists (1,689). Romar also ranks second among AIA’s scorers (4,244 points).

During that time, Romar says he enjoyed dispelling the myth that Christian athletes were soft and not as talented by routinely competing with, and often defeating, teams that were considered heavy favorites. But more importantly, he was able to minister to basketball fans in the United States and abroad, as well as to hundreds of incarcerated criminals.

AIA also afforded Romar his first opportunity to lead his own team—first as a player-coach and then as the head coach. Thanks to the prodding of Mark Gottfried—a fellow AIA alum and current head coach at Alabama—Romar eventually landed on Jim Harrick’s staff at UCLA. Four years later, Romar earned his first head coaching job at Pepperdine, where he led the Waves to a National Invitational Tournament bid in his third and final season. Following the turnaround of that program, he took the head coaching position at St. Louis, where the Billikens claimed the Conference USA tournament title and an NCAA bid in his first of three seasons.

But when Romar was courted by Washington to replace Bob Bender in March 2002, the former Husky had an instant gut feeling that told him he was meant to coach his alma mater all along. After struggling to a 10-17 record in that first season, Romar led his team to four consecutive NCAA tournament berths and three straight appearances in the Sweet 16.

Before Romar could enjoy the fruits of his labor, he first was forced to overcome a challenge to his personal integrity. Cameron Dollar, one of Romar’s assistants and a former star player

at UCLA, was cited for 28 recruiting violations involving the contact of prospective athletes during periods of time in which such contact is not allowed by NCAA rules. As the head coach, Romar was held responsible for the breach of ethical conduct.

“It was something that was very difficult for me, because I had always envisioned having a program that was spotless and without reproach, and that kind of cut into that,” Romar says. “That was tough, but we got beyond it, and I thought we handled it the right way. But at the same time, that is something that I want people to be able to say—not so they can say, ‘Lorenzo Romar is a man of integrity,’ but ultimately so they can see why we do it the right way. It’s because I have a relationship with Jesus Christ. That is my guiding force and motivating force.”

Since then, Romar has been able to reclaim that squeaky-clean image and has managed to win without even the slightest bending of the rules. That doesn’t mean the temptation to do so isn’t lurking around the corner of every high-school campus on which he steps foot.

“There are times when you are not allowed to have face-to-face contact with kids, and there are some coaches who will say, ‘No, we’ll set it up, and we’ll meet you somewhere,’” Romar explains. “And they’ll say, ‘Nobody will know.’ And I say, ‘But I’ll know.’ So I’ve been able to avoid that. And then sometimes other college coaches who are recruiting the same kid will take advantage of those situations. Sometimes the kids will think, *Washington must not be as interested. They didn’t meet with me.* And you have to try to explain why you didn’t. That’s where you say, ‘God will honor it.’”

But for Romar, integrity is about more than doing things the right way despite the pressures and temptations that might push you in the opposite direction. It’s also about standing up for what you believe in—even if that means taking an unpopular stand or one that could draw public criticism from vocal detractors.

Since taking the high-profile Pac-10 Conference job at Washington, Romar has especially felt the heat from those within the media and some within the ranks of higher education who disapprove of his active involvement in ministry-related activities. He has been the subject of national news stories discussing the appropriateness of coaches at state-funded universities incorporating their beliefs in the job setting.

And while Romar contends that he has never “crossed the line,” he always does his best to balance the display of his open-ended faith with a very public life. Much of that ability to successfully juggle the two came from his seven years with AIA, where he regularly spoke at public schools and learned what he could and couldn’t say about God.

“Everything that I’m able to do, I do,” Romar says. “No one can put me in jail because I tell them what changed my life. No one can keep me from telling my personal testimony. I can do that anytime I want. This is not a daily thing where I’m trailing everybody on the team with a Bible in my hand. Sometimes I try to explain why certain decisions are made, and we provide opportunities for kids to go to Bible studies. We just try to create an environment that would make someone say, ‘It’s a little different here than other places I’ve been, and I like it.’”

"I understand that there are laws," Romar continues. "The Bible tells us in Romans to honor the government. But the Lord also calls us to share our faith. If I'm going to go out and force our kids to go to Bible study and I get fired, then I'm not in a position to give God glory anymore. There is some wisdom that needs to take place also."

One of Romar's favorite Scriptures is Romans 12:1-2. The apostle Paul gives us some particularly poignant advice in verse 2: "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."

In Jesus, we have the perfect example of balancing our integrity with the need to respect authority. While He was constantly challenging the status quo of the religious establishment of His day, He never did so in a way that disrespected or sought to overthrow any civil ordinances. And as Romans 12:2 states, our goal is to be in position where we can "discern" the "perfect will of God."

Another one of Romar's favorite Bible verses is Ephesians 5:1, which admonishes believers to "be imitators of God."

"If I can keep that perspective, I am basically living out a script as if I were an actor," Romar says. "I'm not talking about being phony, but I've taken on a different attitude, a different outlook. I see everything through that outlook as I'm guided by my coach or my producer—which is Christ—as opposed to my own views, my fleshly worldly views."

Romar says that when the temptation to cave in to his own humanity is strong, he immediately reminds himself of the damage such a moral failure would do to his witness and any future opportunities he might have to share the gospel. He also relies heavily on the prompting of the Holy Spirit, which helps keep him accountable to the Christ-centered life of integrity.

In fact, some of the best advice on how to handle the pressures that followers of Christ often face from the secular world came from the Son of God Himself when He spoke these words to His disciples in Luke 12:11-12: "Don't worry about how you should defend yourselves or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what must be said."

And Romar knows full well how it feels to follow that divinely inspired leading as opposed to going his own way.

"There have been times when I've made mistakes," Romar admits. "I'm not perfect. But I'm aware of those mistakes, and I'm miserable when I have made mistakes. That's a big, big difference between a man with integrity and a Christian with integrity. I think you can be a man of integrity without being a Christian and not feel guilty when you do it your way. If you've got the Spirit of God living in you, man, you're going to be miserable if you don't do it His way."

Romar has tried it both ways and says there's no comparison between the two paths. As a young man, the lack of Godly integrity left him empty and hopeless. But since he gave Jesus control of his heart and soul over 25 years ago, he has a much better understanding of what true life really looks like.

"The best way to go through life is to be a man of integrity," Romar concludes. "Living a life of integrity doesn't mean you're missing out on anything. You're not. You're actually going to discover the fun part of life. Integrity is ultimately being a man of God."

Go

1. Romar talks about “two different standards” of integrity. Can you give some specific differences between worldly integrity and godly integrity? What are some problems that might arise from living by the world’s standard of integrity?
2. Read Ephesians 5:1. How is abiding by this principle like living out a script, as if you were an actor? In what ways does imitating God change your attitude and your outlook? How might it affect the choices that you make and, ultimately, your integrity?
3. Romar talks about the increasing pressures being placed on Christians who live out their faith in very public ways. Can you describe a time when your public expressions of faith sparked a negative response? How did that make you feel? Read Luke 12:11-12. What does this Scripture say is the best way to handle situations such as those?
4. Romar says, “Living a life of integrity doesn’t mean you’re missing out on anything.” Do you agree with Romar’s statement? Why do you think so many people believe that living according to the Bible is boring and unadventurous? In what ways has your life of integrity proved Romar’s statement to be true?
5. Romar tells about how he maintained integrity while recruiting prospective athletes. How can doing something simple such as following the rules allow you to share your faith with others? Can you describe a similar circumstance when your actions spoke louder than words?

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Bible Reference:

Ephesians 5



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