

Taking the Baton (Integrity - Chapter 10)

Ready:

To Timothy, my dear son: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.

2 Timothy 1:2,5-7, *NIV*

Set

Duke Preston can still hear it now.

“Duke!”

His father’s deep, booming voice echoed throughout the cavernous racquetball court. Just moments earlier, assistant coach Raymond Preston had addressed his son’s freshman football team about a party that had taken place the weekend before. The unsupervised event resulted in a substantial amount of underage drinking—including participation by the younger Preston.

And with his father’s firm, beckoning call, Preston knew he was busted.

“I turned around and walked back, and he said, ‘So what’s up?’” Preston recalls. “And I said, ‘Nothing. What’s going on?’ And he said, ‘I know you were at that party and I know what went on at that party. Were you drinking?’ And I said, ‘Yeah, I guess I had a couple of sips.’”

As far as the young Preston was concerned, life as he knew it was about to end. But the next few words out of his father’s mouth took him completely by surprise.

“I expected him to send me to the car, take me home and ground me for the week,” Preston says. “But he just looked at me and he said, ‘You say you want to be famous. You say you want to be a pro football player. You say you want to get a scholarship. You say you’re a Christian. You say that you want to live your life for the Lord. But these things don’t match up with that. If you really want to play pro football, if you really want to live your life in a righteous way, those things aren’t going to help you get there. In fact, they’ll take you further away from your goals.’”

Still expecting the worst, Preston was even more astonished at his father’s unexpected display of mercy and grace.

“That’s pretty much all he said, and I said, ‘I know,’” Preston continues. “And then he said, ‘It’s

up to you.’ And that was all. I was like, *Wow!* He didn’t yell at me. He didn’t ground me. It was really cool to be enlightened like that in the way he chose to do it. It was a great lesson at a young age in how to handle myself on and off the field and learning how my actions should match up with the words that I say and what I profess to be about.”

To this day, that one moment in time remains a turning point in Preston’s life. Even though it was one of the most defining moments he experienced with his father, it was in reality just part of a series of example-setting events that Preston had witnessed throughout his entire childhood and his early adulthood.

Now as an offensive lineman for the Buffalo Bills, Preston carries that legacy of integrity with him everywhere he goes. It’s a legacy that, from the beginning, he has equated with a greater understanding of Christ-centered values.

“Growing up in a Christian household like I did, my athletics and just my life were real God-centered from a young age,” Preston says. “I correlated the integrity of my parents with biblical wisdom and biblical principles. Even before I was in high school, I always felt convicted. I could hear God speaking to me and really talking to my heart from a very young age in terms of knowing what He did and didn’t want me to do. My parents’ instructions were reinforcing the principles that I knew.”

When Preston was three years old, his father retired from a successful NFL career with the San Diego Chargers. He never experienced that much of his father’s life as a professional athlete, except for the occasional alumni games and special events. Preston believes that being around his dad minus the hype was beneficial to his future life in the pro ranks. It helped him understand the temporal nature of fame and fortune.

Preston and his sister were also blessed to constantly have their dad around, thanks to the sports-apparel business that their father ran out of the family’s home. Not only was the elder Preston able to coach his son’s baseball and football teams, but he was also afforded the opportunity to instill in his son the connective biblical values of integrity and excellence.

“Whatever you do, do it to the best of your ability,” Preston says. “That was a key for me growing up. People ask me all the time if I felt pressure growing up with a dad who played nine years in the NFL. I really didn’t simply because everything he stressed in our home was to do everything the right way and do it to the best of your ability. My dad always stressed that in everything.

“When he was coaching me in Little League baseball, he’d have us run a lap around the tree. We had to run all the way around the tree, not up to the tree or close enough to where you could almost touch it, but all the way around the tree. I’m positive that the reason why I’m where I’m at right now is because my dad taught me how to do things right and to do it right all of the time.”

One of Preston’s favorite Scriptures is about our inspiration to do things the right way. Colossians 3:22-24 instructs: “Don’t work only while being watched, in order to please men, but [work] wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord” (v. 22). It goes on to implore all believers to do everything “enthusiastically, as something done for the Lord and not for men, knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord—you serve the Lord Christ” (vv. 23-24).

“As an athlete, you might try to win your coach’s favor or to win the respect of your teammates,” Preston says. “But as Christians and as Christian athletes, in terms of living our lives with integrity, you need to keep an eternal perspective. We’re doing our work and we’re playing our sport unto the Lord and for His glory—not so much to be looked at by men and to have our fans look at us and glorify ourselves.”

Another part of the legacy that Preston’s father has passed along to him includes the heritage of his humble roots, which pushed him to great success as an athlete, an entrepreneur, a parent and, most importantly, a follower of Christ.

“Before my rookie year, I had about six weeks off, and I went and spent some time with my grandmother in the area where my dad grew up,” Preston recalls. “I was able to see where he came from—which was just a poor neighborhood and a ghetto type of place—and then see him transcend that and move on beyond that. That made me think about the life I grew up with and how easily I could have been born in the same neighborhood where he lived. I have such an appreciation and respect for what he did to do that.”

That visit not only made Preston appreciate his family’s roots but also made him that much more grateful for the daily lessons of integrity, honesty and hard work that his father had passed along to him throughout his childhood and teenage years. That consistency inspired Preston to grab the proverbial baton from his father and carry it with him as he matured into adulthood.

“He had such a heart for instilling values in me and my sister,” Preston says. “We did love God. God was in the center of everything we did. That’s something that motivates me now—that I can be that example to a kid that I speak to and in the future whenever I might have children. It’s definitely something that makes me proud to follow in my dad’s footsteps, more so to be the Christian man that I am now as opposed to me playing in the NFL and following in his footsteps that way. The spiritual treasures that he’s instilled in me are much more valuable to me than any type of football legacy that our family has.”

After a successful football and basketball career at Mt. Carmel High School in San Diego, Preston went to play football for the University of Illinois, where he was a three-year starter at the center position. He quickly earned a reputation as an extremely intelligent athlete with an uncanny technical ability on the offensive line. In fact, over the course of his final two seasons, only one defender was able to break through his position to record a quarterback sack.

With a speech communication degree in hand, Preston entered the 2005 NFL Draft, where he was selected by the Buffalo Bills in the fourth round. In fact, he was the first center drafted out of Illinois in 13 years. But in his rookie season, he found himself mostly on the second string and seeing action off the bench as a center and an offensive guard (including one start for the injured Chris Villarrial) as well as a member of the special teams unit.

In 2006, Preston saw more time as a starter, again replacing Villarrial for much of the season’s second half; and in 2007 he saw a good deal of playing time as the backup at three different positions (left guard, right guard and center). And even though Preston has yet to obtain superstar status, he still understands how the issue of pride and arrogance can creep into any pro athlete’s life. He’s even more acutely aware of the negative spiritual ramifications that accompany such a mindset.

"It's hard, because it's such a pseudo-reality," Preston says. "You're 23, 24, 25, 26 years old, and you're making a paycheck that's just absurd. Everyone wants to be your friend, and everyone wants to be around you. It's real easy to get caught up in what people think of you, and then all of the sudden you start to think more highly of yourself than you should. For me, it's just been a challenge to keep that same godly perspective and that same biblical perspective. God purposed me to be here. It's no accident that I'm in Buffalo. It's no accident that I was drafted where I was. I have to keep the perspective that God has something He wants me to do for His purpose here. It shouldn't be about me and all that I have. All of that stuff comes with it when you're living according to God's purpose."

Preston says he has felt a calling on his life from a very young age. It was that strong conviction to follow God that caused him to stay true to a life of prayer and Bible devotion. In times of trouble or moments of doubt, Preston would look to the Word for direction. Even in something as simple as being nervous over pitching a Little League baseball game for the first time, he turned to Romans 8:31 and reminded himself that "if God is for us, who is against us?"

And thanks to the spiritual heritage and legacy that his father has passed down to him, Preston can boldly move forward in the divine purpose to which he has been called. That includes a personal goal of reaching young people with the message of hope that can be found in the Gospel of Christ.

"Kids these days don't have that," Preston says. "They don't have the hope in knowing that God loves them. There's that power in Jesus that we have access to through prayer and the Word. That's one of the reasons why I like to go out and speak. It's one of the reasons why I wanted to make it to where I am now, so I would have a platform to go talk to kids. It's such a passion of mine to see the faces of kids and think back to when I was that age and remember what I was thinking about and the hopes that I had.

"I'm still geeked on what I get to do now. I got to play on *Monday Night Football*. That's a dream come true. And for someone like me who really felt God move in my life from when I first started playing sports until now, it's really important for me to go out and talk to kids and tell them to dream just as big and help give them the confidence in knowing that God is faithful, and He will take you to where He wants you to be. It may not be exactly the plans you have, but He has great plans for all that He has called according to His purpose."

In his outreach efforts, Preston has learned firsthand the harsh reality that pervades the lives of so many young people today. He understands fully how so many of the ones he meets don't have the advantages of the kind of family heritage that he was blessed to enjoy. That's what makes the task at hand—helping kids learn about integrity and biblical values—so much more difficult.

"That's the hardest job. You just look at the moral standing of our world today and the stuff that you see on TV and all the things that young people are exposed to today. It was hard when I was in middle school and high school to stand firm on my principles. I can only imagine how much harder it is now. Christian values and Christian morals are getting increasingly further away from the norm in society."

Preston realizes that he is just one person trying to make a difference, but he also knows that there are thousands of people around the country working toward the same goal. Some of

these people who were a key part of *his* life came via his involvement with Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Chris Brown, in particular, helped Preston through some difficult times while attending Illinois.

And as young athletes are searching for direction that maybe can't be found at home, Preston suggests going straight to the source.

"Cling to God," Preston advises. "Cling to the things that you know to be true in terms of the Word. You've also got to find something like FCA to get involved with and try to find people who are like-minded with you. I had a few people growing up who had goals like I had and were willing to sacrifice certain things and maybe sacrifice being part of the cool crowd. Try to find friends like that—people who will stand strong with you in times when you feel like you're standing out like a sore thumb because you don't really believe the same things that other people believe."

Ultimately, Preston didn't just take on the legacy that his father passed to him; he boldly and courageously took it from him—just like the anchor in a relay race might grab the baton from a teammate and then run toward the finish line with reckless abandon. Many times he came to a crossroads where he easily could have rejected the integrity that his father had instilled in him. It took challenging situations (like the defining moment he faced as a freshman football player) to help shake off his desire for the things of the world and replace that with a desire to follow in the footsteps of both his earthly father and his heavenly Father.

"For those who don't have the father figure that I had, it's really no different how God does it," Preston says. "He's going to get your attention one way or another. It could be through the booming voice that my dad had when he called me off the racquetball court, or it could be something small. It's always interesting to see how God gets His will accomplished. He's going to do it one way or another."

Go

1. What are some of the valuable lessons about integrity that Duke Preston learned from his father? Can you describe any stories where someone taught you the meaning of integrity with their words or their actions?
2. Read Colossians 3:22-24. How does what this Scripture relates differ from the mentality of so many people in the public eye? Preston says that our pursuit of integrity requires "an eternal perspective." What do you think he means by that statement? What are some ways that you can keep an eternal perspective in various aspects of your life?
3. When Preston visited his father's old neighborhood, it helped him to understand the correlation between humility and integrity. How are those two characteristics intertwined? How can a lack of humility interfere with the pursuit of integrity? What are some ways that you try to stay humble at all times?
4. Read 2 Timothy 1:2-7. Why do you think Paul felt compelled to recognize the example of integrity set by Timothy's mother and grandmother? How can those kinds of examples in your life fortify the "spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" described in verse 7?
5. Author Neil Kurshan says, "Morality is not only taught; it is caught." What does that phrase mean to you? How much responsibility do you think should be placed on those teaching integrity? How much responsibility do you think should be placed on those being taught integrity? What are some ways that you can "catch" integrity from someone else?

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Bible Reference:

2 Timothy 1



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