

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 on November 9, 2014 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: Legacy
Today's Focus: Integrity

"Build a Lasting Legacy of Integrity"

Today we're talking about how to build a legacy of integrity that lasts.

Now how many of you know what this is a picture of? {pic} That's right, it's the tallest building in our country. It's called One World Trade Center. This is the building in NYC that stands as a monument to the resilience of America. It stands in that very place where the Twin Towers tragically fell on 9/11.



This past week the first occupants of One World Trade Center moved in. Admittedly some people expressed some anxiety working in a building that could be the target of terror attacks. Others though expressed little fear. They talked instead about the structural integrity of the building itself.

Literally this building was designed and engineered to be the most structurally sound skyscraper in the world even if, God forbid, if another 9/11 type attack were to occur. Reinforced concrete throughout. Specially tempered, blast resistant glass. A redundant steel frame. Then there are the four hundred closed-circuit surveillance cameras that have been placed in and around the site, with live camera feeds being monitored around the clock by the NYPD. The result is that it's been called, "The most secure office building in America." So much effort has gone into making it structurally sound and safe. Can you imagine how terrible and sad it would be to watch it all come crashing down?

If even for a moment that thought makes you feel sick to your stomach, then consider how God feels when a person's moral integrity is compromised through defiant sin or a person comes crashing down due to unbelief or this happens to a whole generation. After all not unlike all the time and work of many people that went into building the new World Trade Center...God has been building us up. He has invested in each of us, his people. He has given his Son, Jesus, into death that we might live. He has given us his word and sacraments. He has poured out his Spirit. He has given us pastors and teachers. He has given us churches and schools. What a tragedy if our legacy that we passed down would be one of moral compromise, collapse, or unbelief. You see just as the structural integrity of a building matters, so does our moral integrity. It matters.

This is why God inspired the Apostle Paul to write these words in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 to help us build a lasting legacy of moral integrity...

¹Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ²for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

Now personally I've never had labor pains, but from what I hear there's something sudden, unstoppable, and irreversible about them! When it's time for that baby to come, it's just time. That's what God is trying to teach us about the day when Jesus is going to return to judge the living and the dead. He wants us to learn that people's actions here on earth matter because there is an ultimate, final day of reckoning. Paul here calls it "the day of the Lord."

This is a common expression in the Bible—the day of the Lord. It's coming. When? Here's the thing... I don't know. You don't know. No one does. So you can't just plug a date into your calendar like "Ok, November 16—Judgment Day, all day event" and then set a reminder the night before on your phone to turn your life around and turn to God. No, it doesn't work that way. So beware of anyone who rents a billboard to tell you when it's gonna be, ok? They've been wrong—100% of the time.

But in the meantime life just goes on, right? Elections take place. New developments are planned. We map out our future. We plot our path to prosperity. We envision a time of peace and safety. But one day in the midst of life like this "the day of the Lord" will come like a thief.

Last Sunday evening I came down with some kind of flu-like bug. Just a 24 hour thing. But it was sort of a time of reckoning. You know that feeling right when you wake up in the middle of the night and you have to rush to the bathroom? It's a most unpleasant feeling—when that queasiness starts in your stomach. And you can't stop what happens next. It's sudden, unstoppable, and irreversible. So this was my one consoling thought that night at 2 am...at least now I have a sermon illustration for next Sunday! But this is exactly what Judgment Day will be like—like something sudden, unstoppable, and irreversible.

Of course the world tells itself again and again, "Oh don't worry about God. There is no judgment. Everything's gonna be alright. Just do whatever makes you happy." That's why a constant refrain of the Bible is, "Wake up. Be ready. Stay alert." Paul writes,

⁴But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. ⁵You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. ⁷For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night.

Now maybe you're thinking, "What's up with all this talking about getting drunk, darkness, night, falling asleep?" Well you see he's not just picking on Milwaukee's favorite past time—drinking. He's using drunkenness and darkness and sleeping as metaphors to describe a dangerous spiritual condition we should avoid. I mean think about drunkenness for a minute. When you're intoxicated, your mind gets foggy and forgets the implications of things. You forget that your actions still do in fact have consequences. You lose your judgment. Your senses get dull. You can't walk straight. You can lose your balance. And this is how some people are going through life unaware that the day of the Lord is coming. They're in darkness. They're spiritually asleep or in a kind of stupor.

Of course I'm not just talking about those people out there—those sinners out there. No, but there's also a part of each of us that's drawn towards this kind of thinking. There's a part of each of us that loves the darkness, right? There's a part of us that wants to get to "check out" from having to think about judgment

or consequences for our actions. A part of us that doesn't care about maintaining moral integrity because it thinks everyone ought to be allowed a few weaknesses.

I have a friend who's a pastor in Las Vegas. He can look out his window at night and see the lights of the Las Vegas strip. And as we were studying this Bible text together via Skype this week he asked an obvious question, "When do people want to go and see the strip...during the day or during the night?" Well it's the night, isn't it? It's the night when those bright lights draw people in. It's the night when everything happens. It's for the nightlife that the tourism department developed the slogan, "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas." Now why is that appealing? Because there's a part of each of us that hates the notion of maintaining moral integrity all the time, right?

Aren't there times when you have a little conversation with yourself where you say... "You know for someone like me who works so hard, I ought to be able to blow off a little steam however I want once in a while." Or, "For someone like me who tries so hard to be a good person most of the time, I deserve a little time for myself to be bad. And I mean it can't really be that bad anyway if it feels so good, right?" Or, "You know for what I have to put up with at home day in and day out, I deserve to hold a few secrets of my own." Or "You know if I donate this time or money to this or that charity and it makes me feel good on the inside, how could God hold me accountable for things I do on the outside." Or the ultimate rationalization, "Well, after all, nobody's perfect."

Ah well therein lies the problem. Nobody's perfect. Our moral integrity is not structurally sound enough. What we've built up on our own with how we've lived our lives cannot and will not stand up on the day of the Lord. This is why the sinful nature part of us needs to hear that if you continue to sleep on God, if you continue to love the darkness, if you cannot stay spiritually sober and alert...the day of the Lord will come upon suddenly and swiftly and irreversibly with God's judgment. Do not be deceived just because the world says, "Peace and safety. It's all ok. Nobody needs pastors anymore today."

However, this need not happen to you. Paul writes, ⁸ *But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.* ⁹ *For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.* ¹⁰ *He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.* ¹¹ *Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.*

Friends, here's the good news. *God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.* You know what this means, right? God does not go around picking and choosing people he hopes end up in hell. He has not appointed you to suffer wrath in hell either. That's why he appointed his Son, Jesus, to suffer it for you. *He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him.* Now here in this verse "awake" refers to people who are still physically alive when Jesus returns and "asleep" refers to those who have already died because no matter whether you're still alive or you've already died when Jesus returns, God's will is that you would experience the eternal victory Jesus Christ has won for you when he took your place on the cross, paid for your sins, and rose from the dead in triumph. You see this is why God wants you to be sober, to be alert, and to live with integrity according to his word--because he wants you to live with him in heaven. He doesn't want you to miss out. He's done

everything through our Lord Jesus Christ to make this possible because he is a God of grace, of mercy, of abundant forgiveness. Again and again the Scriptures tell us, *“As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live...”*(Ezekiel 33:11)

So how do we live in view of the coming day of the Lord? By wearing our body armor. Let’s go back to verse eight where Paul says, *But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.*

Recently our United States Marines have been coming home from the Helmand province in Afghanistan where over the last couple years, 378 of them died and 5,000 were wounded. I heard however that as tragic as those numbers are, in wars past it would’ve been more like 50/50—the number killed vs the number wounded. So the difference now vs then? We try and make sure every soldier has the best possible body armor. And here’s what I’ve learned. Wearing body armor... it slows you down. Wearing it day in and day out has even led to some people developing problems with their knees or back problems over time carrying the extra weight. But in the end it saves lives. So it might slow you down, but it can help save your life.

Isn’t wearing the armor of God kind of like that too? Day in and day out to put on faith, hope, and love as your armor...it might seem to slow you down. I mean going to church regularly to build up your faith...aren’t there other things you could be doing with your time? Well sure! I mean you only get so many days off after all. You only get so many days to sleep in. And how about praying or reading the Bible or attending a small group or going to a Bible study? There are other things you could be doing with your time, right?

Or how about helping your neighbor in need? Why that might be terribly inconvenient. That might get in the way of all kinds of plans. Or what about giving church offerings? Think about that one for a second. There are probably all sorts of things you could spend that money on, right? But if you give an offering it might slow down your ability to pay off debt. It might setback the number of vacations you take. It might put off how soon you can upgrade your iPhone 5c into a 6 plus or get the S5 instead of the S4.

So yeah, putting on our body armor: faith, hope, and love...hearing God’s Word and living our lives to honor Jesus our Savior, supporting the ministry of the Gospel so that the world may learn of him and come out into the light... that might “slow you down”, but it’ll help keep you spiritually alive so that you don’t end up dead.

¹¹ *Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.* Anybody here need some encouragement to live a life of integrity that honors God? Any of you need some reassurance that God’s grace is sufficient for you? Well this is the reason why we’re here together and God brings us together as a church family. Boy there’s a lot of tearing down out there in the world, isn’t there? I’m sure thankful all those political attack ads are done. But the devil’s not. He’s coming after our integrity. He’s coming after our morality. So let’s do what God wants us to do and keep praying for each other. Let’s keep speaking words of encouragement and sharing Scriptures with each other. Let’s keep encouraging each other to stay sober, to be ready, and be alert. Let’s build each other up so that together we can build a legacy of integrity that lasts.

Because finally friends, there is only one “building” in which you can be completely safe and secure. It’s truly the safest building in the world because in a sense it’s the one building that’s also not of this world. You know what it is? The holy Christian church! How do you get in? By trusting in Jesus Christ alone and through baptism being connected to his perfect life, death, and resurrection. The perfect work of Jesus is what makes the Church the most structurally sound building there is. It says in the Bible: ²¹ *In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.* ²² *And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit* (Ephesians 2:21-22). Amen.

My Next Steps

Tension: The people around me say it’s okay, but God tells me it’s wrong. How do I remain a man or woman of integrity living in a society that is losing its moral foundation? How do I teach my children to live with integrity growing up in a moral free-for-all?

Connect: We build on the foundation that Jesus laid—his life, death and resurrection, his call to live *in* this world but not be *of* the world, his motivation and his power to be the new creation he has made us.

Treasure: *“For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

Challenge: See the directions for creating a personal/family crest on page 15 of the worship folder. Then create your crest on page 16!