

These verses, which address godly integrity, make the transition from Paul's introductory word of praise to the first subject in the main body of the letter. Starting in verse 15 Paul will explain his failure to visit the Corinthians – a failure which had brought accusations from some that his word could not be trusted. In vv 12-14 Paul prefaces his response with a declaration of his integrity in all his conduct.

But verses 12-14 are also tied closely to the preceding verses. The conjunction which is translated “now” in the NIV more frequently introduces the cause or reason for what precedes. Hence, Paul is probably saying that he could count on the prayerful support of the Corinthians and the thanksgiving for God's gracious provision, because their boast was this – it was the testimony of their conscience – that they had conducted themselves with all integrity. His godly integrity was the foundation for his confidence that other believers will join together to pray for him and together thank God for His provision.

A godly integrity is therefore important if we want to expect others to pray for us and join us in thanking God when He answers. In these few verses there are at least five requirements for godly integrity.

1. Godly integrity requires pure motives.

“Holiness” (v 12, NIV) does not represent the Greek text preferred by its editors, but rather a word translated “simplicity”, which as a moral trait means “purity of motive” or “integrity”, and is elsewhere “singleness of heart.” “Sincerity” originally had a simple meaning of “clearness”, which was derived from its original meaning of “judged by the light of the sun”. Glass jars were checked for structural integrity by holding them up to the light of the sun. Not only should motives be “single”, they should be “clear” and unmarred.

If we are to live with integrity, we should not consciously have hidden motives. Since it is sometimes hard to know even our own heart, it is important to regularly and prayerfully occupy ourselves with the Word of God which is God's tool for judging our hearts and its motives (Hebrews 4:12).

2. Godly integrity requires reliance on God.

Paul writes that “simplicity and sincerity” are from God. They are not products of our doing, but the work of God, i.e., fruit of the Spirit as in Galatians 5:22. Paul also writes that they conducted themselves “not in worldly wisdom but in God's grace”. (Cf. 1 Corinthians 1-2. They did not rely upon human devices, such as rhetoric or persuasive techniques, but simply preached Christ crucified and trusted God to work.)

This sets godly integrity apart from mere human attempts at consistency or frankness. We must rely upon God to work in us the simplicity and sincerity which are essential to integrity. We must rely upon God to work in others, rather than trusting in own schemes and devices.

3. Godly integrity requires consistent conduct whatever the audience.

Paul conducted himself with integrity both in the world and toward the Corinthian believers.

When we see in others a failure to act consistently, it creates suspicion and weakens any support we have of them. Saying one thing to one person and something different to someone else, or acting one way on Sundays (or around believers) and another way on Monday (among unbelievers), demonstrates a lack of godly integrity. Eventually inconsistency in conduct will catch up with the person. Godly integrity requires consistent conduct whatever the audience.

4. Godly integrity requires agreement between words and action.

There is a play on words in verse 13 that is difficult to communicate in English. The phrase “read or understand” uses two similar words. The latter has more the sense of “know by experience” or “know fully” rather than to comprehend something. Hence Paul is probably saying, “We are writing to you nothing other than what you read (in our letters) and know (from our lives).” He is claiming a consistency between what he writes and the way he lives. (He was accused of being inconsistent.)

Popular Christian wisdom agrees with this truth: “practice what you preach” or “walk the talk”. This does not require perfection but at least honesty about our faults and imperfections. But godly integrity does require that what we say agrees with what we do.

5. Godly integrity requires properly giving credit to God.

Interpreting verses 13a-14 is challenging and centers on the phrases which the NIV translates “in part” and “fully”. Other translations have “until the end” instead of “fully”, which I believe is more probably the meaning, and refers to “the day of our Lord Jesus.” “In part” probably refers to their depth of knowledge about Paul, not to their ability to understand what they knew nor to the percentage of Corinthians that understand. Most significantly Paul claimed that he could boast of the Corinthians in the day of the Lord and that they could boast of him. Their boast is first mentioned by Paul and helps define his. The Corinthians could not boast of personal contribution to Paul, but that he represented God's gracious working towards them. Similarly, Paul could boast in the Corinthians because of what God had done in them through him. He could say this because his conscience gave testimony that he had conducted himself with them in godly integrity. He gave God proper credit for all that He accomplished. Anything less would not have been godly integrity. Those who humbly give all credit to God, despite their own labor, are those for whom we gladly pray and praise God for the continued successes He brings into their lives.

In a world where integrity seems to be disappearing, godly integrity should cause the believer to stand out like a bright light. We must guard against being influenced by the world's low standard of integrity. If we want the confidence of which Paul wrote, then we must pursue the same godly integrity.