

# **Integrity, Sin, and Saints: What does it mean to be a person of integrity who is both holy and confesses sins?**

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**Abstract:** Scripture affirms the possibility and necessity of personal integrity. It also commands saints to confess sin to one another. This paper explores the intersection of integrity, sin, and holiness from the following perspectives: 1) English translations' use of 'integrity' and the Hebrew and Greek terms behind it; 2) Semantic similarity and dissimilarity in Hebrew, Greek, and English understandings of integrity as an ethical description of a person; 3) How confession of sin by saints relates to having and maintaining personal integrity. The paper concludes with reflections on the implications of the paper for elders and deacons.

## **Introduction**

Few of us have not experienced the bitter disappointment of hearing about, or even worse, discovering serious integrity failures by a Christian leader. Calls for integrity abound to the extent that it is almost clichéd to say there is a crisis of integrity in Christian leadership.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the bounds of the church, integrity is a concern across every academic discipline, and the rise of AI has only heightened it.<sup>2</sup> Culturally, it appears that “contemporary Western culture has come to regard integrity as a preeminent public and private virtue. The meanings now given to integrity appear to cluster around its form, which is personal coherence, and its content, which is standing for something important.”<sup>3</sup> Given this broader cultural understanding of integrity, what Scripture means when it affirms the possibility and necessity of personal integrity deserves careful attention. Further, Scriptures commands saints to confess sin to one another. This paper explores the intersection of integrity, sin, and holiness from the following perspectives: 1) English translations' use of 'integrity' and the Hebrew and Greek terms behind it; 2) Semantic similarity and dissimilarity in Hebrew and English understandings of integrity as an ethical description of a person; 3) How confession of sin by saints relates to having and maintaining personal integrity. The paper concludes with reflections on the implications of the paper for elders and deacons.

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1. A small sample includes Christopher J. H. Wright, “Humility, Integrity, and Simplicity,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 39, no. 4 (2015): 214–18; Gary R. Corwin, “The Integrity Challenge,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2017), 4–5; Harvey R Sider, “Integrity: ‘Mother of All Virtues,’” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 30, no. 3 (2007): 395–421; Jerry White, “The Power of Integrity,” *Discipleship Journal* 107 (1998): 33–37; John F. MacArthur, Jr., “In Defense of Integrity,” *Masters Seminary Journal* 8, no. 2 (1997): 137–49.

2. A quick search for academic integrity and AI will return a raft of blogposts and articles. More formal discussions are not lacking. See, for example, Mike Perkins, “Academic Integrity Considerations of Ai Large Language Models in the Post-Pandemic Era: ChatGPT and Beyond,” *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* 20, no. 2 (2023): 1–24. For institutional discussions, see for example, Cornell’s discussions of “AI and Academic Integrity” and “Promoting Academic Integrity in Your Course,” accessed July 25, 2024, <https://teaching.cornell.edu/generative-artificial-intelligence/ai-academic-integrity>.

3. Dennis Wayne Hiebert, “The Insufficiency of Integrity,” *Pastoral Psychology* 51, no. 4 (2003): 293. Hiebert offers a penetrating assessment of the insufficiencies of integrity. See also the valuable treatment of the topic by Stephen L. Carter, *Integrity* (Harper Collins, 1996).

## I. The Use of ‘Integrity’ in English Translations

This section looks briefly at the current senses of the word ‘integrity’ in English, examines the use of ‘integrity’ in English translations, and then traces the Hebrew and Greek terms translated ‘integrity.’ The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers three main senses for ‘integrity’:

1. The condition of having no part or element taken away or wanting; undivided or unbroken state; material wholeness, completeness, entirety.
2. The condition of not being marred or violated; unimpaired or uncorrupted condition; original perfect state; soundness.
3. Soundness of moral principle; the character of uncorrupted virtue, esp. in relation to truth and fair dealing; uprightness, honesty, sincerity.<sup>4</sup>

Similar definitions are found in discussions of ethics in business, psychology, and medicine.<sup>5</sup> The *OED*’s third sense of the word is the focus of this paper and, so far as I can tell, the sense intended by English translators in their use of the term.

### ‘Integrity’ in English Translations

The earliest use of the word ‘integrity’ in English translations appears to be the three instances of “integritie” in the 1560 Geneva Bible (Psa. 41:12; Prov. 20:7; Tit. 2:7). It does not appear in Tyndale’s NT (1534) or the Coverdale Bible (1535). The Bishop’s Bible (1568) appears to have used it once in the text (Psalm 25:19) and once in an explanatory header for 1 Kings 12.<sup>6</sup>

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4. The *OED* notes a moral sense existing between 1561-1678 that it regards as obsolete: “Unimpaired moral state; freedom from moral corruption; innocence, sinlessness.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “integrity (n.),” July 24, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1327125083>. A similar definition appears in Merriam-Webster: 1) “firm adherence to a code of especially moral or artistic values: *incorruptibility*”; 2) an unimpaired condition: *soundness*”; and 3) “the quality or state of being complete or undivided: *completeness*.” Merriam-Webster, s.v. “Integrity,” accessed July 24, 2024, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/integrity>. So also the *American Heritage Dictionary*, cited in John MacArthur, *The Power of Integrity: Building a Life Without Compromise* (Crossway, 1997), 7.

5. **Business ethics:** Jan Warren Duggar defines integrity as “Integrity is the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles; moral uprightness. It is generally a personal choice to hold oneself to consistent moral and ethical standards” in “The Role of Integrity in Individual and Effective Corporate Leadership,” *Journal of Academic and Business Ethics* 3, no. 1 (2009): 1–7. **Psychology:** Peterson and Seligman offer “Integrity [authenticity, honesty]: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one’s feelings and actions.” C. Peterson and M. E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (American Psychological Association, 2004), 29. **Medicine:** Louise A. Mitchell, “Integrity and Virtue: The Forming of Good Character,” *The Linacre Quarterly* 82, no. 2 (2015): 149–69. Mitchell defines integrity in terms of “good moral character” and argues that “To be of good moral character, a person must have knowledge of the good, act in morally good ways, and be disposed and inclined toward the good through the virtues” (163).

6. The first line of the header for 1 Kings 12 reads, “Samuel declaring to the people his integritie, reproveth their ingratitude.”

Use of integrity gets a sharp uptick with the KJV (1611),<sup>7</sup> occurring sixteen times in the OT and none in the NT or Apocrypha.<sup>8</sup> After the KJV, usage climbs steadily. The usage statistics in a selection of versions since the KJV are given in Chart 1.

	OT	NT	Total
KJV	16	0	16
NIV	18	4	22
ESV	24	1	25
RSV	25	1	26
NASB95	27	0	27
NLT	31	3	34
NASB20	33	0	33
NET	39	2	41
CSB	44	1	45

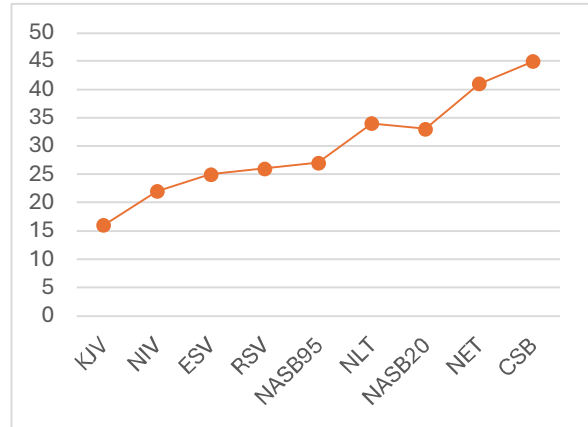


Chart 1: Integrity in Selected English Versions

Several items of interest appear in the data. First, there is an increased frequency of usage across time, the NASB20 doubling and the CSB nearly tripling the usage of the KJV.<sup>9</sup> Second, usage does not track consistently with the formal vs. functional translation spectrum. For example, the CSB which appears to operate from basically the same translational approach as the NIV has twice as many uses as the NIV, and the NASB20 and the NLT are nearly identical. Third, even within a formal equivalent version like the NASB, usage of ‘integrity’ rose nearly 20% between 1994 and 2020 (6 additional uses). Fourth, usage of ‘integrity’ in the NT translations is infrequent and doesn’t track with the rise in usage evident in OT translations.

Given the disparity in usage frequency across these versions, an examination of consistency in translating original language terms is in order. Questions that deserve answering include: 1) What words are now being translated ‘integrity’ that weren’t previously? 2) What might increasing frequency of usage mean for how integrity figures in theology, ethics, and the thoughtful Bible-reading Christian’s thinking about integrity?

7. For a similar assessment of Jerome’s translation choices in Latin for rendering the words translated ‘integrity’ by the KJV, see Margaret E. Mohrmann, “Integrity: *Integritas*, *Innocentia*, *Simplicitas*,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 24, no. 2 (2004): 25–37.

8. The 1611 KJV spelling is ‘integrity’ once (Prov. 19:1) and “integritie” fifteen times (Gen. 20:5, 6; 1 Kgs 9:4; Job 2:3, 9; 27:5; 31:6; Psa. 7:8; 25:21; 26:1, 11; 41:12; 78:72; Prov. 11:3; 20:7).

9. The 1984 NIV and the 2011 NIV have the same number of occurrences. However, they differ in two places (Prov. 17:26; 2 Cor. 1:12). In Proverbs 17:26, the 1984 NIV reads “It is not good ... to flog officials for their integrity,” whereas the 2011 NIV reads, “to flog honest officials is not right.” In 2 Cor. 1:12, the 1984 NIV reads, “we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God,” whereas the 2011 NIV reads, “we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity.”

### Hebrew Words Translated ‘Integrity’

In the OT, ‘integrity’ most commonly translates words from the תָּמַם (*tamam*) word group (31x). The יָשָׁר (*yashar*) word group comes in second highest (16x), followed by אָמֵן (*’aman*; 8x), צַדִּיק (*tsadaq*; 4x), and אֶחָד (*’echad*; 1x) trailing in last. The usage statistics for each Hebrew word translated ‘integrity’ are presented in Chart 2.

	תָּמַם	תָּמַם	תָּמַם	תָּמַם	יָשָׁר	מִישׁוֹר	אֶמֶת	אֶמֶת	צַדִּיק	צַדִּיק	יָשָׁר	אָמֵן	מִישׁוֹר	אֶחָד	יָשָׁר	יָשָׁר
KJV	*	*														
NIV	*	*		*	*	*	*	*	*	*						
ESV	*	*	*													
RSV	*	*	*													
NASB95	*	*	*	*	*											
NLT	*	*	*	*	*	*					*	*				
NASB20	*	*	*	*	*	*										
NET	*	*	*	*		*	*	*	*	*		*	*			
CSB	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*			*		*	*	*	*
	9	9	7	6	5	5	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1

Chart 1: Hebrew Words Translated ‘Integrity’

The data suggests that there is a growing willingness on the part of translators to see elements of the יָשָׁר (*yashar*) word group and the צַדִּיק (*tsadaq*) word group as having ‘integrity’ as a sense. These terms have historically been translated “upright” and “righteous,” respectively. It may also suggest a broadening of some translators’ understanding of the semantic range of ‘integrity’ in English.

### Greek Words Translated ‘Integrity’

In the NT, the English versions surveyed use ‘integrity’ to translate a handful of words—ἀφθορία, ἀληθής, ἀπλότης—and two phrases—ἐν ᾧ δόλος οὐκ ἔστιν and μὴ διλόγους. As seen in Chart 3, the KJV, NASB95, and NASB20 do not use ‘integrity’ in their translations of the New Testament.<sup>10</sup>

	ἀφθορία	ἀληθής	ἀπλότης	ἐν ᾧ δόλος οὐκ ἔστιν	μὴ διλόγους
KJV					
NASB95					
NASB20					
NIV	*	*	*		
ESV	*				
RSV	*				
NLT	*			*	*
NET	*	*			
CSB	*				
	6	2	1	1	1

Chart 2: Greek Words Translated ‘Integrity’

10. The NKJV does use ‘integrity’ to translate ἀφθορία in Titus 2:7.

Out of the Greek words translated ‘integrity,’ ἀφθορία is the only term that translators consistently render as ‘integrity’ across multiple versions.<sup>11</sup> Glossed by BDAG as “soundness, lit. incorruption,” ἀφθορία occurs once in Titus 2:7.<sup>12</sup> Paul exhorts Timothy to show himself to be an example of good works and [ἐν τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ ἀφθορίαν, σεμνότητα],” which is translated variously as “in your teaching show integrity” (NIV, RSV, ESV, NET), or “with integrity and dignity in your teaching” (CSB), or “Let everything you do reflect the integrity and seriousness of your teaching” (NLT).

It is striking that the set of NT Greek words translated ‘integrity’ (see Chart 3) share only one lemma (ἀπλότης) with the words the Septuagint translators used for *tamam* word group.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that NT translators may not view the Greek words as having the same meaning as the LXX translators did. Perhaps even more striking is that contemporary discussions of integrity which are based in the NT, give little or no attention to the NT texts where ‘integrity’ occurs in the surveyed versions. Rather, it appears that the concept of integrity is rooted in NT texts that address consistent truthfulness in speech (Matt. 5:37; James 5:12; Eph. 4:25; Col. 3:9–10), transparency in handling of money (2 Cor. 8), consistent goodness in one’s conduct (1 Pet. 2:12), and harmony between one’s words and actions (1 John 3:18). In other words, the concept of integrity in the NT is not tied to a particular set of lexemes, and the words used by the LXX in “integrity passages” are not translated as ‘integrity’ when they occur in the NT.

In sum, the upward trend in the usage of ‘integrity’ suggests a widening preference for this term among translators. Since its usage frequency doesn’t clearly align with standard translation philosophies, it may be that its usage is influenced by other factors, including a broadening of the word’s meaning in English. Since its usage is concentrated in the OT the following section focused on the semantic range of the Hebrew terms frequently translated

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11. The NIV and NLT translate ἀληθής as ‘integrity,’ though they do not do so in the same places. The NET uses ‘integrity’ to translate ἀληθής in John 7:18, “The person who speaks on his own authority desires to receive honor for himself; the one who desires the honor of the one who sent him is a man of integrity [οὗτος ἀληθής ἐστίν], and there is no unrighteousness in him.” The NIV uses ‘integrity’ to translate ἀληθής in Matthew 22:16 and Mark 12:14 which are parallel synoptic texts: “Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity [οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἀληθής εἶ]. You aren’t swayed by others ....” The NIV also uses ‘integrity’ to translate ἀπλότης in 2 Corinthians 1:12: “we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity [ἐν ἀπλότητι καὶ εὐκρινείᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ].” (The NIV 1984 deviated from the standard critical text reading here [ἀπλότητι] and followed ἰ 46 s\* A B C *et al.* in reading ἀγιότητα. The NIV 2011 appears to have followed the critical text reading.) The final two uses of ‘integrity’ in the NLT serve as functional equivalents of phrases that indicate the absence of dishonesty. In John 1:47 the NLT reads, “Jesus said, “Now here is a genuine son of Israel—a man of complete integrity [ἐν ᾧ δόλος οὐκ ἔστιν].” In 1 Timothy 3:8 the NLT reads, “deacons must be well respected and have integrity [μὴ διλόγους].”

12. William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 156. The Byzantine Text of Titus 2:7 has ἀδιαφθορία instead of ἀφθορία. The meanings appear to be identical.

13. The words used by the LXX in the instances where the *tamam* word group is translated ‘integrity’ are καθαρός, τελειότης, ὁσιότης, ἀπλότης, ἀκακία, ἄμωμος, ἀπλῶς, ἀληθεία, and ὁσιος. Out of the 27 texts where the NASB95 uses “integrity,” the LXX used ἀκακία/ἀκακόν eleven (11) times and ἄμωμος three times. Both occur in the NT (ἀκακός—Rom. 16:18; Heb. 7:26; ἀμώμος—Eph. 1:4; 5:27; Phil. 2:15; Col. 1:22; Heb. 9:14; 1 Pet. 1:19; 2 Pet. 3:14; Jude 1:24; Rev. 14:5; 18:13), but neither are translated ‘integrity’ in the surveyed versions. Both are often translated “blameless.”

‘integrity’ and the degree to which there is overlap with the semantic range of ‘integrity’ in English.

## **II. The Semantics of ‘Integrity’ in Hebrew and English**

A rigorous review of the meanings and contextual uses of all the Hebrew words translated ‘integrity’ is beyond the scope of this paper. To focus our study I will give attention to the uses of the *tamam* word group where it is translated ‘integrity.’<sup>14</sup>

As viewed through the set of texts that use ‘integrity’ to translate the *tamam* word group, the person of integrity [*tamim*] works righteousness and speaks truth in his heart (Psa. 15:2). He trusts in Yahweh without wavering (Psa. 26:1). He gives heed to the blameless [*tamim*] way, and walks within his house in the integrity [*tom*] of his heart (Psa. 101:2). His speech is marked by integrity [*tamim*] (Amos 5:10). He, therefore, has a “walk” or life characterized by integrity [*tom*] (Psa. 26:1). As a result, the man of integrity [*tom*] is shielded by Yahweh (Prov. 2:7). He is upheld in his integrity [*tom*] by Yahweh and established in His presence (Psa. 41:12). His [the *tom*’s] walk is secure (Prov. 10:9). He is guided by his integrity [*tummah*], which is an attribute of uprightness (Prov. 11:3). His [the *tom*’s] sons are blessed after him (Prov. 20:7). Negatively, he is not crooked or treacherous (Prov. 11:3; 28:6), does not pervert his ways (Prov. 10:9), and is not perverse in speech or a fool (Prov. 19:1).

The individuals to whom God attributes ‘integrity’ are Abimelech (Gen. 20:5-6, *tom*), Job (Job 2:3, *tummah*), and David (1 Kgs 9:4, *tom*). God’s attribution of ‘integrity’ is perhaps the most telling for understanding the contexts and limits of integrity. In the case of Abimelech, the evaluative lens is very narrowly focused. He was judged to have integrity solely in the matter of taking Sarah without knowledge that she was Abraham’s wife. In this case, his integrity is a function of culpability not of morality. It is always wrong to take as one’s wife a woman currently married to another man. But God held Abimelech innocent, and protected him from irremedial sin, because he did not know she was married.

In the case of Job, God describes him as “blameless (*tom*) and upright, one fearing God and turning away from evil And he still holds fast his integrity (*tummah*), although you incited Me against him to ruin him without cause” (Job 2:3). Job steadfastly insists that he is innocent of wrongdoing, including denials of lust, adultery, idolatry, and injustice (Job 30–31). Though Job acknowledges the sins of his youth (Job 13:26) and repents of his misjudgment of God (Job 42:3–6), God never imputes sin to Job. He begins blameless in God’s sight and, so far as the narrative is concerned, he ends blameless in God’s sight (Job 42:7–8). Job is an amazing model of integrity.

The third example, David, sets the evaluative lens is at its widest angle. God assesses David’s life as one of “integrity [*tom*] of heart and uprightness”: “As for you, if you will walk before Me as your father David walked, in integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to

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14. With additional time and space, it would be worthwhile to trace the LXX vocabulary for integrity in the NT and observe how it might shape our understanding of Christian integrity. As a gesture in that direction, The Louw-Nida domain 88.39-45 “Honesty, Sincerity” includes the idea of integrity. But this domain does not include the words normally translated ‘blameless’ (ἀμώμος, ἄμεμπτος, τέλειος) which are used for the *tamam* word group.

all that I have commanded you ....” (1 Kgs 9:4). This “integrity of heart” is contrasted with turning away from Yahweh and serving others gods (1 Kgs 9:6).

David’s “integrity” is judged in terms of fidelity to Yahweh and the pattern of his life. We all know David sinned egregiously on more than one occasion (Bathsheba, Uriah, numbering the people). He had a problem with lying (e.g., 1 Sam. 20:6; 21:1–2; 27:12–14). He violated Deuteronomy 17’s explicit prohibition regarding multiplying wives. Yet, God says to Jeroboam, “My servant David, ... kept My commandments and ... followed Me with all his heart, to do only that which was right in My sight” (1 Kgs 14:8).<sup>15</sup> In contrast to his great grandson Abijam whose “heart was not wholly devoted to Yahweh his God, like the heart of his father David,” the inspired narrator describes David as “[he] did what was right in the sight of Yahweh, and had not turned aside from anything that He commanded him all the days of his life, except in the case of Uriah the Hittite” (1 Kgs 15:5).

It seems that God’s appraisal of David’s integrity focused on his cumulative record, viz., the total picture of his life. The lapses in obedience were not accompanied by lapses in fidelity to Yahweh as the only true God. This is what it means for David to have served God with integrity of heart. Thus, integrity in 1 Kings 9:4 has a life-long scope but a narrow reference to covenant loyalty to Yahweh.

The foregoing data indicates that where a person’s actions are innocent of intentional wrong doing (Abimelech, Job) the *tamam* word group overlaps well with the English ‘integrity.’ However, in English we find it perplexing even contradictory to designate a person who has been guilty of adultery and murder a “man of integrity.” Where the *tamam* word group is used summatively of a whole life of fidelity to Yahweh despite grievous sins deserving death, ‘integrity’ in the sense of “steadfast adherence to a moral or ethical code” does not share the same semantic space.

### **III. Saints Confessing Sin and Personal Integrity**

It hardly needs to be argued that the NT expects followers of Jesus to be honest (Eph. 4:15), to mean what they say and say what they mean (Jam. 5:12), to keep their commitments (Matt. 5:33), and to live consistently with their claim to know Christ (1 John 2:6). If this is what it means to be a person of integrity in the NT sense, what is the relationship of integrity, holiness, and confession of sin? In this section I briefly flesh out six propositions: 1) believers are saints; 2) saints don’t practice sin; 3) saints may sin; 4) when saints sin, they confess that sin; 5) when saints see a brother sin, they address it; and 6) biblical integrity requires confession of sin.

#### ***Believers are saints***

Holiness is a hallmark of God’s people in all covenants and dispensations. God sets his people apart to himself, giving them a status of holiness (Exod. 19:6; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9). God also

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15. דָּוִד אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַר מִצְוֹתַי וְאֲשֶׁר-הָלַךְ אַחֲרַי בְּכָל-לְבָבוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת רַק הַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינָי: ... (1 Kings 14:8). Perhaps this assessment by God is reflective of the reality articulated in Ezekiel: “But if the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed and observes all My statutes and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live; he shall not die. All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live” (Ezek. 18:21-22).

expects and enables his people to share his character in their dispositions and their deeds (Lev. 19; 1 Pet. 1:15–16). The NT in particular consistently designates God’s people as saints or “holy ones” (ἅγιοι) some sixty times. Christ’s expectation for his followers was not that they would be less righteous than the Pharisees, but more righteous (Matt. 5:20). Although that greater righteousness is the righteousness of faith, it is not one that gives less attention to loving obedience to God’s commands (John 14:15, 21–24; 1 John 2:3–4). A good example of NT expectations for holy living may be found in 1 Thessalonians where Paul affirms that they are pleasing to God (4:1–2), calls them to holiness in all matters sexual (4:3–8), and prays for their establishment in holiness (3:12–13) and their complete sanctification (5:23–24).

### ***Saints don’t practice sin***

John’s first letter insists, with jackhammer-like repetition, that those who are born of God practice doing right (1:7; 2:29; 3:7, 10). They do not practice<sup>16</sup> doing sin (1:6; 2:3; 3:6, 8, 9; 5:18). Indeed, they cannot practice sinning for the very nature of God is within them (3:5, 9). In Pauline language, those who practice the works of the flesh “will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:16), or “if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom. 8:13). Even the easily besetting sin is regarded not as an inevitable-but-undesirable reality. Rather, it receives the admonition, “let us lay [it] aside ... and run with endurance” (Heb. 12:1).

### ***Saints may sin***

Yet, within John’s framework—believers persistently practice righteousness, walk in the light, and love the Father and others—he acknowledges that believers may sin (2:1) and gives directions for dealing with believers who are caught sinning “a sin not unto death” (5:16–17). Though 1 John 1:8 has often, and wrongly I believe,<sup>17</sup> been understood to teach that any

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16. The language of “practice” attempts to capture in English three things: 1) John’s use of lexemes that are inherently continuative (to walk, to abide, to be in, to keep); 2) aspectual portrayal of verbal events as imperfective (using indicative, subjunctive, infinitival, and participial present tense-forms), and 3) grammatical structures that entail the portrayal of events in progress (e.g., indirect discourse with present tense-form participles). These features of John’s letter create an epistle-wide portrayal of action that is intentionally and persistently engaged in. John’s dichotomy between those born of God and those who are of the devil trades on the practices of each group. For current discussion of the state of verbal aspect in biblical Greek, see Constantine R. Campbell, *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Zondervan Academic, 2024).

17. For reformed critiques of the common (mis)understanding of 1 John 1:8, see the NET Bible note on 1 John 1:8 as well as Christopher Bass, *That You May Know: Assurance of Salvation in 1 John*, NACBST (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008), 69–70. Bass and others argue convincingly that to “have sin” in 1 John 1:8 refers not to committing acts of sin but to being culpable for past acts of sin. See John 9:41; 15:22, 24; and 19:11 for the only other Johannine uses of this phraseology. Since Romans 7:14–25 is often used to “balance” John’s portrayal of God’s children as not practicing sin, note the following reformed theologians who argue that Romans 7 describes Paul’s pre-conversion state: J. A. Bengel, H. A. W. Meyer, F. Godet, M. Stuart, Sanday and Headlam, J. Denney, J. Oliver Buswell Jr., A. Hoekema, M. Lloyd-Jones; cited in Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1127. For more a recent review of this issue, see Thomas H. McCall, *Against God and Nature: The Doctrine of Sin* (Crossway, 2019), 364–268, and Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1996), 445–448, or pages 449–455 and 467–475 in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (2018), where Moo argues, “for a combination of the [pre-conversion] autobiographical view with the view that identifies *egō* with Israel. *Egō* is not Israel, but *egō* is Paul in solidarity with Israel” (455).

declaration by a Christian that they do not “have sin” is a sign of self-deception, it is clear that John envisions the children of God not as sinlessly perfect but as persistently practicing walking in the light. The one who hopes to be like Jesus when he sees him, persistently engages in purifying himself (3:3).

***When saints sin, they confess that sin***

If and when a believer commits sin (1 John 2:1), the Johannine expectation is that he/she will confess and repent and pursue the path of light (1:7–9; cf. Prov. 28:13), or in the language of 1 John 5, a brother will “ask and *God* will give life to/for him” (1 John 5:16). “Jesus gives a daily prayer pattern that includes a petition for forgiveness of sin (Matt. 6:12, 14–15; Luke 11:4).<sup>18</sup> The petition for forgiveness does not assume daily sin, but it does assume the daily need for reflection on whether we have forgiven others in the same way we desire God to forgive us. Jesus expects us to need to forgive one another and to address sin in each other’s lives (Luke 17:3–5; Matt. 18:15–17). Paul shares the same expectation, as evidenced by his calls to forgive one another (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13).

***When saints see a brother sin, they address it***

The texts that teach believers to address other believers sinning are well-plowed soil in fundamentalist contexts such as this one (e.g., Matt. 18:15–17; Gal. 6:1; 2 Thess. 3:6, 14–15; 1 Cor. 5–6; Tit. 3:9). What may need more attention is the role that the noetic effects of the fall should play in our identification of sin and our approach to believers who it appears have sinned.<sup>19</sup> To play on “Hanlon’s razor,” believers should not attribute to malice what may be attributed to ignorance.<sup>20</sup> Matthew 18:15–17 also has its unspoken limits that need more frequent voicing: when the sinner poses a sexual or existential threat to the one sinned against, private conversation is not the appropriate first stage. This is so precisely because the trust that private conversation entails has already been damaged or destroyed by the use of privacy in committing the sin. Though such caveats are necessary, the point here is that Scripture anticipates saints sinning and provides guidance for restorative intervention.

***Biblical integrity requires confession of sin***

A key component of Scripture’s guidance for restorative intervention is confession of sin.<sup>21</sup> Not only is confession of sin commanded, but confession of sin *to one another* is commanded: “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another” (Jam. 5:16).<sup>22</sup>

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18. Note the range of vocabulary used to translate Jesus’ prayer into Greek: παράπτωμα, ὀφείλημα, ἁμαρτία.

19. By this I have in mind the fallen mind’s tendency to assume its correctness, to assume it can read others’ motives, to stereotype, to rush to judgment, and so on.

20. The original quote is “Never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanlon%27s\\_razor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanlon%27s_razor). Accessed July 26, 2024.

21. For clarity’s sake, the confession of sin in view here is post-conversion confession of sin by a believer who is seeking to walk in the light.

22. For a recent argument disconnecting James 5:16 from the topic of healing in 4:14–15 and instead of prayer and Elijah in 5:17–18, see Daniel K Eng, “Healing from Sin: The Effective Prayer in Jas 5:16,” *Trinity Journal* 44, no. 1 (2023): 37–50. Confession of weakness and areas of susceptibility to sin are no less concerns in

Honesty and transparency are essential to the holy character to which Scripture calls believers (2 Cor. 8:21).<sup>23</sup> We are called to speak the truth in our hearts (Psa. 51:6) and to one another (Eph. 4:15, 25; cf. Zech. 8:16). The truth is that holy people have fleshly desires and must walk in the Spirit to avoid fulfilling them (Gal. 5:16). Holy people have not yet perfected holiness, but are perfecting it in the fear of God by cleansing themselves from any defilement of flesh and spirit as they discover it (2 Cor. 7:1). Holy people know that they are not already perfected (Phil. 3:12), and so they press forward even as they discipline their bodies so that they will not be disqualified (1 Cor. 9:27). Holy people obey Scripture, including Scripture's command to confess sin to one another.

Not all sin requires confession to another believer, but some sins do. Confession should be appropriate to the context, role, and maturity of the persons involved. By context-appropriate, I have in mind at least the following guidelines. Confession should be as wide as the sin's scope of impact. Confession should also be as public as the sin. Confession should take place within a context of mutual commitment to confidentiality, spiritual support, and for the purpose of receiving forgiveness and admonishment from fellow pursuers of holiness. Gender-specific temptations and sins are best confessed in same gender contexts. By role-appropriate, I have in mind roles such as elders, deacons, teachers, students, pastors, congregants, and so on. Pastor-to-congregation transparency regarding some sins may be edifying and instructional. My sense, subject to correction, is that in general the kind of spiritual support within which confession should take place would suggest that elders should be accountable and transparent with fellow elders, congregants with congregants, students with student. By maturity-appropriate, I have in mind the reality that both physical and spiritual maturity impacts believers capacity to process confessions properly. Galatians 6:1 is relevant here.

## **Conclusion**

In answer to the question, "What does it mean to be a person of integrity who is both holy and confesses sins," holy persons persistently practice honesty, including the honesty of acknowledging spiritual wrong doing when it occurs. Holy people engage in role-, context-, and maturity-appropriate transparency and accountability precisely because integrity is best fostered and maintained in fellowship with other persons who are practiced in and practicing pleasing God in all things.

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Scripture (Rom. 15:1; 1 Cor. 2:3; 2 Cor. 11:29–30; Heb. 4:15; Jam. 3:2), but they lie just outside the scope of this paper.

23. "I take [James 5:16] to mean simply that in the normal life of the Christian, honesty and truthfulness and purity of heart involve continual admission and confession of sin to appropriate people in our lives." John Piper, "How Important Is It to Confess My Sin to Someone Other Than God?" Desiringgod.org. Accessed July 28, 2024. <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/how-important-is-it-to-confess-my-sin-to-someone-other-than-god>.

### **Some Implications for Elders and Deacons**

James says “in many things we all stumble” (Jam. 3:2). In context, it seems reasonable to assume that he includes himself in the “we.”<sup>24</sup> James asserts that true and undefiled religion is to visit the widows and orphans and keep oneself unspotted from the world (Jam. 1:29). James also admonishes believers to confess their sins one to another (Jam. 5:16). It would seem then that part of keeping oneself unspotted from the world is confessing sins when they soil our garments. Indeed, it seems that James expects leaders who are characterized by upright behavior to be willing to acknowledge and confess when their behavior has failed to meet that standard.

A robust doctrine of sin leads, as Michael Jenkins observes, to three postures of integrity.<sup>25</sup> The first is *distrust of unfettered individual power*. He notes, “A robust Christian doctrine of sin not only doubts the wisdom of entrusting a group's fate to the unchecked will of a single leader, it also calls into question the wisdom of seeking wisdom in the mind of any lone individual.”<sup>26</sup>

The second posture is *valuing deliberative processes and countervailing forces*. Jenkins articulates well the perceptual flaws that sin brings to humanity: “hidden from ourselves, alienated from our motives, and in need of something beyond our own perception to gain a true and authentic apprehension of who we are, what we are doing, why we are doing it, and the consequences of our actions.”<sup>27</sup> As a result, persons of integrity must hold that “there are times when we must rely on others (others no less flawed in character and motives than ourselves) to help us perceive a fuller picture, correct our own partial understanding, distinguish the best among the possible courses of action before us....”<sup>28</sup>

Jinkin's third posture is *humility that trusts in collective wisdom*. By this Jenkins does not mean that every decision must be made through a committee. He does mean that leadership which operates or seeks to operate apart from collective wisdom lacks the humility that a biblical understanding of the doctrine of sin and human finitude requires.<sup>29</sup>

To Jinkin's three postures, I would like to add that the practice of regular, context-appropriate confession of weakness and sin by spiritual leaders, regardless of their title, has the strong support of both Scripture and church history as a vital means for promoting the holiness of humility.<sup>30</sup>

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24. He is cautioning his audience that teachers come under stricter judgment by God, making our human liability to stumble with our words a serious liability.

25. The term ‘posture’ does not appear in Jinkin's essay but captures the orientations he proposes.

26. Michael Jenkins, “The Integrity of Ministry: Communicative Theology and the Leadership of Congregations,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 8, no. 1 (2009): 1, 20.

27. Jenkins, “The Integrity of Ministry,” 12.

28. Jenkins, 12.

29. In Jinkin's words, “If our leadership is an expression of faith in the perceptions and hopes of others, if, indeed, our leadership is ultimately an expression of faith in the God whose knowledge and wisdom are beyond all human understanding, then our leadership is also an expression of trust that includes considerable distrust of ourselves, distrust of our own motives, and ends, and of our own partial and flawed perceptions” (25).

30. For further discussion, see Travis David Hutchinson, “The Theology and Practice of Confession of Sin in the New Testament and the Most Primitive Churches” (Masters Thesis; University of the South, 2012); J.

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Rodman Williams, "A Fellowship of Confessors," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 4, no. 3 (1949): 40–43; Jana Hofmanová, "Communal Confession of Sins and a New Vision for the Church," *Communio Viatorum* 64, no. 1 (2022): 69–78.