Integrity is everything. Honesty is everything. Trust is everything. When our actions match our words we build trust. Every good work in the world is built on telling the truth. Our relationship with God is built on the integrity of our words and our actions.

This is the first point in Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan. It is not difficult to recite the ten commandments. It is not difficult to name the two greatest commandments: love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

It is much more difficult to actually love God. It is much more difficult to actually love your neighbor as yourself. It is much more important to love your neighbor.

Not only are actions more important than words, it is actually counterproductive to use good words with bad actions. If we tell people that clean air is a priority, and then we put more pollution into the air we have harmed them twice. If we tell people that we value them, but then we treat them with no respect we have harmed them twice.

The first harm is to not be truthful. The first harm is to devalue the meaning of words. The first harm is to push people towards despair and cynicism.

God’s intention is for us to build relationships of trust. God’s intention is for us to tell the truth. God’s intention is that our words would be matched by our actions.

This is Jesus’ point in the story of the Good Samaritan. Integrity is the foundation of our relationship with the one who creates us. Honesty and truth is the foundation of everything good in the world.

Lack of honesty and truthfulness was the problem for the nation of Israel in the time of Amos. Amos lived 750 years before the time of Christ. At the time the nation of Israel had been divided into two kingdoms by the descendants of King David.

You might remember that there were twelve tribes of Israel, named after the twelve sons of Jacob. The tribes of Judah, Simeon and Benjamin were clustered in the southern part of the country. About 50 years after David died these regions of Judah, Simeon and Benjamin became the Southern Kingdom. Since Judah was the largest and most powerful of these regions, the Southern Kingdom was called Judah.

The Northern Kingdom was larger. It included eight tribes or regions: Zebulon, Manassah, Reuben and all of those other tribes with the fun names like Naphtali. Since the Northern Kingdom was larger and more powerful it kept the name Israel, kind of the way the Northern States kept on being called the United States of America during the Civil War.

The first fundamental thing to know about the Northern and Southern Kingdoms is that the Southern Kingdom survived as the Kingdom of Judah, in some form, for most of the 800 years after the time of Amos. The Northern Kingdom did not survive. The armies of Assyria invaded the Northern Kingdom in waves of attacks. 700 years before the time of Christ the Northern Kingdom had been wiped from the map of history.

By the time of Jesus all of the rich, fertile lands of the Northern Kingdom had long been called Samaria by the Jews of Judah. You could call the residents of Samaria the long, lost cousins of Jesus’ people, the Jews. They were the descendants of Jacob. But Jesus’ people called them the Samaritans, and it wasn’t a compliment.

The second fundamental thing to know about the Northern and Southern Kingdoms is that even though Israel is not a large country, the climate changes quickly as you go from north to south. The further south you go, the drier it is. The southern part of Judah is a desert. As you go further north there is more and more rain. The land is more fertile. That means most of those grape vineyards and olive orchards you hear about in the Bible are located in the Northern Kingdom. The land in the north was rich, as they say “flowing with milk and honey”. The Southern Kingdom was rugged and poor.
All of this is important for the story of Amos. Amos says to Amaziah, *I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman. I gather the leaves and fruit of the sycamore trees for my sheep. The Lord took me from following my flocks and sent me into the Northern Kingdom. The Lord has chosen Amos, not because Amos is a professional prophet, not because Amos has the best resume, but because the Lord needs someone to tell the truth to the king and to the people of the Northern Kingdom.*

So Amos left his flocks and journeyed to the north, about 30 miles north of Jerusalem, near Bethel, into the heart of the Northern Kingdom. There the Lord showed Amos a series of visions. In the first vision the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by."

The point is this: The king and the priests and the rich people of the Northern Kingdom are crooked. God is going to set things straight. God is going to make a judgment about the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. God will judge the people according to the laws God has given. Care for the orphan and widow. Care for the poor. Do not steal or lie. Do not worship other gods.

When Amos goes to the Northern Kingdom he sees the many ways God’s laws are being broken. The first violation is that the priests of Israel are leading the people in worship of gods of fertility. Amaziah and the other priests of the Northern Kingdom have erected a statue of a bull on Mt. Bethel. The second violation is the way the poor are being treated. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. The rich landowners are using their power to steal every bit of land and wealth from the common people. The rich farmers are using their wealth to buy out the poor farmers, creating larger and larger estates. The land is rich and there is good rainfall so the large estates are very prosperous, producing large crops of olives and grapes. This is very good for those who own the land, but there are many poor people. Those who labor on the large estates are not paid fairly. Within the same tribe of people the poor people are effectively becoming slaves of the wealthy people.

This is the setting for the conflict between these two men, both of whom can make a claim to be servants of God. This first is Amos. Amos does not think of himself as being a special servant of God. He says, “I am not a prophet. I am not even the son of a prophet. I am a herdsman.”

The second person is Amaziah. Being a priest, Amaziah makes a claim to be a servant of God. Amaziah thinks he was born for this job. Amaziah came from a long line of priests. Now Amaziah is the high priest of Bethel. Amaziah rose quickly through the ranks of priests because it was his priority to have a good relationship with the king. Amaziah maintained a good relationship with the king by telling the king what he wanted to hear, by not advocating for the poor, and by caving to popular pressure and erecting a statue of a bull at Bethel.

The conflict between Amos and Amaziah comes down to the question, ‘Which of these two is a person of integrity?’ ‘Which of these two is living and telling the truth?’ God’s answer is overwhelming; you cannot be the king’s yes-man and be a person of integrity.

God’s judgment is overwhelming. The destruction foretold in the book of Amos became the reality for Amaziah’s family, for the king and the rich plantation owners. Their plantations were taken from them and they were led into exile.

It all comes back to the central point of the story of Amos and the story of the Good Samaritan: integrity. The effect is sometimes seen on the outside. All of the work is done on the inside. It is an individual, personal decision to live as a person of integrity. It requires work, it requires sacrifice to live as a person who tells the truth.

Amos made personal sacrifices in order to tell the truth. You and I have to make personal sacrifices in order to tell the truth. The king may not like it and the boss may not like it. Your friends and family members might be uncomfortable with it. But God calls us to a life of integrity. It comes from work that is done deep within each one of us. It comes from a decision to take a risk, to tell the truth we know, the truth we see.