

J. C. Penney: A Life of Integrity

By Marco Scouvert



At the age of 22, James Cash Penney (1875-1971) worked as a clerk for a “Golden Rule” store. His honesty and work ethic led the owners to eventually offer him a partnership, and he opened his own store. James was so successful that he bought out his partners and renamed the business the J.C. Penney Company.

Penney built his enterprise upon personal convictions from the Bible. Accordingly, he banned haggling, charging different prices based on a customer’s apparent wealth or education, and eliminated hidden fees. Rather, he sold goods at one clear fixed price for everyone. He also refused to offer store credit, which trapped poor families in high-interest debt cycles, and completed only cash transactions. In these ways, he valued personal integrity and love for his customers and employees over personal wealth and success.

An Early Test

In 1898, Penney had poured all of his money into a butcher shop he owned. To secure the business of the largest client in town, the hotel, Penney was asked to provide the head chef with a bottle of whiskey each week. He supplied it once, but was immediately convicted in his conscience and resolved never to do it again. As a result, he lost the hotel’s business, and his shop closed down. He said, “I lost everything I had,” but learned to never compromise or resort to expediency. He became forever convinced of, and committed to, the truth of Proverbs 28:6 — “Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity than a rich man who is crooked in his ways.”

What About You?

Here are five reasons why integrity in every sphere of life is what you should desire:

A man with integrity is a better picture. He is truthful, trustworthy, righteous, just, and fair. As such, he reflects God’s beautiful character. But the crooked man is deceitful, treacherous, unjust, and twisted. He embodies the hideous nature of the Devil!

A man with integrity has a stronger influence on others. His example encourages others to tell the truth, keep their word, and look out for the good of others. This gives life to people and seeks their welfare. In contrast, a crooked person’s conduct teaches others to lie, break their promises, and be selfish in their dealings. This corrupts, degrades, and kills.

A man of integrity commands greater respect. Many indiscriminating people despise the poor and honor the rich. But if you really think about it, which person would you rather have as your mother or father, a teacher for your children, or as president of the country: a person of upstanding character or one who maintains a perverted life?

A man of integrity has greater peace and joy. In the daytime, he does not fear anyone revealing his lies. At night, he sleeps peacefully without the anxiety of being exposed as a cheat. Even when someone accuses him of wrong, he rejoices because his conscience is clear before God. By contrast, the crooked man is often miserable. He doesn’t have as much money as he would like or as many nice things as some rich friends. He is worried he could suddenly lose his business or possessions. And he is always looking over his shoulder, fearful that his dishonesty will be found out, or that someone might repay him for taking advantage of them (cf. Proverbs 28:1).

A man with integrity has better prospects. The wisdom literature of the Bible generally states that in this life, his godly character guides, liberates, and delivers him from perilous events. By contrast, the crookedness of the wicked confuses, enslaves, endangers, and destroys him. And the Scriptures absolutely declare that at death the godly man’s integrity will rescue him from judgment, leading to eternal life and glory. But the ungodly man’s perverseness will bring everlasting condemnation and death (cf. Proverbs 11:3-8; 21:6-7; 28:18; Psalm 37:16-17; 84:11).

Once more, here is that verse which so characterized J. C. Penney’s life. Let’s live by it:

“Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity than a rich man who is crooked in his ways.”

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