

Character Counts (Integrity - Chapter 12)

n/a

Ready:

Blessed are the pure in heart, because they will see God.

Matthew 5:8

Set

One of Coach John Wooden's favorite Bible figures is Job. That might seem an odd choice for the man known for leading the UCLA Bruins to a record-smashing 10 NCAA men's basketball championships, producing a slew of All-Americans and developing NBA stars such as Lew Alcindor (now Kareem Abdul Jabbar), Bill Walton, Walt Hazzard, Marques Johnson and Henry Bibby.

But for the people who know Wooden best, the choice isn't the least bit surprising, as can be extracted from one of the Bible's most straightforward passages: "There was a man in the country of Uz named Job. He was a man of perfect integrity, who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1).

That verse might seem simple on the surface, but the unique events of Job's life truly make his pursuit of integrity compelling. Because of Job's character, God had placed a hedge of protection around him and his family. He was blessed with health, wealth and prosperity. But Satan questioned that faithfulness, so he asked for an opportunity to test Job and find out if he truly loved God.

Satan attacked Job with great sickness and immense poverty. He even took the lives of his children. While Job cried out and questioned his fate, this man of integrity never turned his back on God and ultimately found a way to worship God despite the traumatic circumstances. Eventually, Satan was vanquished from Job's life. Job's health was restored and his material possessions were increased.

Like Job, who struggled in his faith during those hardships, Wooden candidly admits that there have been times in his life when he failed to live up to the highest standards of integrity. While those moments have been far and few between, he has always learned from his mistakes and been able to use them to not only better his own life but also the lives of those around him.

"At UCLA, I was tempted to be dishonest many times," Wooden says. "Mostly I resisted, but there was one situation of which I am not very proud. An opposing coach repeatedly sent the wrong shooter to the free-throw line. Since the opposing coach got away with this illegal maneuver, I tried it too. But I was not so good at being stealthy—and I got caught. I regret giving in to temptation, not only because I got caught but primarily because I did not stay true

to my standards.”

Wooden also had a smoking habit that began during his World War II military service and plagued him early in his coaching career. He would quit during basketball season, and he never smoked in front of his players. But he felt convicted and realized that he needed to do a better job teaching the impressionable athletes not just about basketball but also about living a life of integrity.

“A leader’s most powerful ally is his or her own example,” Wooden says. “There is hypocrisy to the phrase, ‘Do as I say, not as I do.’ I refused to make demands on my boys that I wasn’t willing to live out in my own life. Leadership from a base of hypocrisy undermines respect, and if people don’t respect you, they won’t willingly follow you.”

Wooden’s standards come straight from the Bible, which he began reading as a teenager. By the time he was in college, he was reading it on a daily basis. This habit continued on throughout his marriage to his wife, Nellie, of 53 years (she passed away in 1985).

Wooden dove into the Bible because he enjoyed spending time in God’s Word. To him, it was never the arduous task that sadly skews most Christians’ perception about reading the Bible. Instead, Wooden’s joyful participation in Bible study helped him to understand the purpose of God’s commandments and empowered him to live out the truth found in Psalm 119:11: “I have treasured Your word in my heart so that I may not sin against You.”

“The Lord created each of us to be unique, and because of that, many of us have differing values,” Wooden says. “But I believe God put some absolutes in place. The Ten Commandments reflect some of His absolutes. When we violate those absolutes, we fail as people of integrity.”

According to Wooden, one of the most important pillars of integrity is honesty, which he describes as “doing the things that we know are right and not giving into the temptation to do the things that we know are wrong.”

Of course, Wooden fully realizes that honesty isn’t a natural occurrence in the human DNA. Once Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden by disobeying God and then lying about it, mankind was instantly plagued with the hereditary disease of dishonesty. Jesus pointed out this harsh reality to the religious leaders of the day when He rebuked their self-righteous attitudes in Matthew 12:34, saying, “How can you speak good things when you are evil? For the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart.”

It’s the condition of the heart that produces truth or lies, good or bad choices, or healthy or destructive behaviors. But the root cause can always be traced back to what a person has allowed into his or her heart through the portals of the ears and the eyes, which are then filtered through the mind.

“Integrity in its simplest form is purity of intention,” Wooden says. “It’s keeping a clean conscience. Purity of intention is really a reflection of the heart. The heart of a person with integrity always wants to do what’s right, once he or she is sure what ‘right’ is.”

In his 40 years of coaching high school and college basketball, Wooden saw every kind of personality and character type imaginable. He coached players who had something he calls “selective integrity,” but he also worked with athletes who had a firm grasp on the concept. At the end of the day, it was the ones who chose the narrow road who received the greatest

rewards.

“When we have integrity, we are not going to do anything that will be demeaning to anybody else, either on or off the court,” Wooden says. “And with integrity, we will never consider letting our teammates down. I think I can safely say that the more the quality of integrity was represented in the best seven or eight players on each of my teams, the better their team play became.”

While Wooden enjoyed great success based on the team play produced by young men with outstanding integrity, winning championships and personal accolades has never measured up to the spiritual blessings that accompany the life of Christ-centered character. In fact, it was Jesus Himself who in the famed Sermon on the Mount said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, because they will see God” (Matthew 5:8).

But beyond the eternal ramifications of honesty and integrity, Wooden believes that there are immense benefits here on Earth for those who choose to embrace truth at all times. “Honesty is not only the best policy, but it is also the best therapy,” Wooden says. “Telling the truth and being true to ourselves not only enhance our relations with others and with God, but they also make us feel good about ourselves.”

Go

1. Read Job 1:1. Because of Job’s integrity and faithfulness, God allowed Satan to test him with every tragedy imaginable. When you’re dealing with tough times—financially, physically, personally—what kind of effect do those circumstances tend to have on your character? What gives you strength and peace of mind during such trials?
2. Coach John Wooden is an avid Bible reader and has been since his youth. Read Psalm 119:11. What truth found in this passage is the key to living with integrity? What are some specific ways that your study of the Bible has helped you make good decisions in life?
3. Wooden says, “Integrity in its simplest form is purity of intention.” Do you agree with that statement? Read Matthew 12:34. What commentary do you think Jesus was trying to make about the condition of the heart with regard to one’s actions? Do you think it is possible to serve others but with wrong motivations?
4. What are some tough decisions that could challenge one’s integrity? How does one’s willingness (or lack of willingness) to face the consequences of such a decision speak to the issue of motive and intent (or purity of heart)?
5. Read Matthew 5:8. What does this Scripture state is the ultimate benefit of having a pure heart? How might that blessing come to fruition in this life? What about in the next life?

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Bible Reference:

Matthew 12



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