

# WHAT MATTERS?

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Anyone who knows college basketball knows two things: first, that should they win today, Michigan is ranked #1 in the country. The second thing that anyone who knows about college basketball knows – is the name John Wooden. John Wooden was the coach of the UCLA Bruins back in the 1960's and 70's. His teams won 10 NCAA basketball championships and at one point had a win streak of 88 games. No teams have come remotely close to either of those records. Wooden built his success on a very clear understanding of the fundamentals of the game. Not just how to pass and how to shoot, but how to play as a team. How to discipline yourself as a person so that you contributed to the success of the team. His mantras included: Discipline yourself, and others won't need to. One never scores without acknowledging a teammate. A word of profanity and you sit for the day. Treat your opponent with respect.

For Wooden there were things that mattered and things that didn't matter. Discipline and teamwork mattered; pretty much everything else didn't matter.

One of the rules of the team was no long hair and no facial hair. Remember this is the 1970's – the decade that spawned the Broadway musical called *Hair*. At the beginning of one season the star center of the team, Bill Walton – perhaps the best player in the country, walked into practice with a beard. “It is my right!” exclaimed the phenom. Wooden asked if he believed that strongly. Walton said he did. “That’s good, Bill,” the coach said, “I admire people who have strong beliefs and stick by them, I really do. We’re going

to miss you on this team.” And he pointed him to the locker room while he whistled the team to practice. Walton went to the locker room and immediately shaved it off.

Some things matter and some things don't matter. Teams matter. Beards don't matter. Wooden and Walton remained like father and son until Wooden died at the age of 99.

Professional golfer Jeff Sluman had played himself into contention at the Bay Hill Invitational Tournament several years ago. After the second round he was at 5 under par. He went to bed feeling good about his chances of winning the tournament. And then a nagging thought entered his brain. When he had put his ball into the water on the seventeenth hole and then hit his next shot from the tournament designated drop zone – while it had been the rule to do this – he realized that it had put him actually closer to the hole than where his ball had fallen and had put him at an unfair advantage. He woke the next morning and convened the rules people and the rules people told him that hitting his ball from the wrong spot was not his fault. It was the fault of the tournament. No penalty was necessary. “It doesn't matter what the rule is,” said Sluman, “what matters is that we play fair.” Sluman disqualified himself from the tournament.

Some things matter and some things don't matter.

So we turn the page of Christmas this week – and in Luke's Gospel that means an immediate introduction to John the Baptist – the forerunner of Jesus and the announcer of the new age. The voice crying in the wilderness, making straight the path of God. “Bear fruits worthy of repentance!” he says to the people.

“The time has come where some things matter and some things no longer matter.” It doesn’t matter whether you can trace your family tree back to Abraham. It doesn’t matter if your parents and grandparents went to church. It’s a new day. It’s a new age. Some things matter and some things no longer matter.

And so the hands go up in the class – because they want to know what matters now. Tell us, prophet John, tell us what matters. What kinds of things are going to be on the test? “Well,” says the prophet, “say for example, if you have two coats – or two pairs of shoes – or two Sunday outfits – look for someone who doesn’t, and make sure they get what they need. If you have a cupboard full of food, make sure that no one else is going hungry.”

The tax collectors came and asked, “What about us? What matters for us?” And the prophet said, “Don’t take more than what you’re supposed to. No lining your pockets. No getting rich at the misfortune of others.” The soldiers came and asked the same thing. “What matters most for us?” And the prophet said, “Don’t misuse your power. No shakedowns. No extortion. Be satisfied with your wages.”

“Because you see,” said John, “the Messiah is coming. He is soon to take the stage. And he brings his winnowing fork. Now everyone back then knew what the winnowing fork was. It was the tool that you used when you were taking in the grain from the field. The grain from the field brought with it the unnecessary covering called chaff. It was this protective coating on the wheat – that is inedible for humans. And farmer knew how important it was to separate the wheat from the chaff. The winnowing fork was a shovel that you

used to cast the grain into the air and the wind was to blow the chaff away. The psalmist in Psalm 1 says that the wicked are like chaff that the wind drives away.

So the Messiah comes with his winnowing fork ... to separate what matters from what doesn't matter. The wheat and the chaff.

Now what is surprising in all this, as Luke describes it, is that all this is called *good news*. "With many other exhortations," he says, "John proclaimed the good news to the people."

Good news? Somebody is changing the rules here. Somebody is making new demands here. Somebody is calling the shots as to what matters and what doesn't matter. And you call this good news? Isn't it good news when I don't have to make a choice? Isn't it good news when you can have your cake and eat it too? Isn't it good news when it's all gain and no pain? Isn't it good news when it is all about me? Isn't it good news when I don't really have to care about anyone else? How can this message of the prophet be good news? Maybe because life has a funny way of turning things that don't matter into things that, whether we like it or not, really matter to us. The trivial in our minds turn into the treasure. The truth is life gets filled with a lot of things that don't matter, doesn't it?

Life doesn't just get filled with lots of things that don't matter, but life is often driven by things that don't matter. You know what I am talking about. We have this tendency, don't we, to fill our checkbooks with things that don't matter. To fill our time with things that don't matter. To fill our worries with things that

don't matter. To fill our conflicts with things that don't matter. To fill our brains with things that don't matter. To fill our conversations with things that don't matter. And then all of a sudden the things that don't matter start to matter. We grow used to them. They become a part of us and we can no longer distinguish them.

You undoubtedly have heard the story of the man who got a ticket to the Super Bowl. It was a pretty good seat. And so he is sitting there and the game has begun and between him and the next guy is an empty seat. *An empty seat at the Super Bowl.* So he says to the guy, "Gee, I wonder where this guy is?" And the fellow says, "Actually, my wife and I bought these two seats for the game a while ago, but since then she passed." "Oh, I'm sorry," says the man. After a few seconds he says, "But don't you have any friends or family you could have invited to the game?" "That's the problem," said the man, "they're all at the funeral."

Some things matter and some things don't matter – but a lot of the time we have a hard time distinguishing between the two.

But there do come those clarifying moments, don't there? You get a call in the middle of the night that someone you love has been in an accident—and when you hear the word "accident" you know that very little else matters – except that your loved one is alive and is all right.

I read an account not long ago of a family whose house was struck by a tornado and within a second disintegrated. The picture showed mom and dad and children huddled in circle holding each other. And the mother said, "All that matters is that we have each other."

I told you before of wrapping the family car around a telephone pole on Christmas Day – when I was all of 16 years of age. Our family who had been inside the car were now all in the Emergency Room with broken bones and head injuries. As I sat there, the magnitude of what I had done was quickly overwhelming me. My father looked over at me and said, "Nothing else matters except that nobody else got hurt, and we are going to be all right."

It is good news when you learn what matters and what doesn't matter.

So the prophet and Messiah take center stage with their crying voice and winnowing fork and say, "We've got good news. There are things that matter and things that don't matter. There is wheat and there is chaff. Life is not a random exercise. Life is not a game of survival of the fittest. Life is not dog eat dog. Life has meaning. Life has purpose. Life has within it things that truly matter and things that truly don't matter. There is wheat and chaff, and both are in all of us."

But behold, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. And the kingdom is that place to which we are invited to discover all those things that matter. The kingdom of heaven is that person who invites us into a community where it is less about us and more about them. A place where when someone scores –

somebody else gets acknowledged. A place where we never put ourselves at an advantage over others. A place where we discipline ourselves so that others won't need to. A place where nothing matters, but that others don't get hurt and all end up well.

*That all end up well.*

Don't you think that's what Jesus was trying to say when he talked about the Son of Man returning with all the angels? And how the sheep would be separated from the goats. The wheat from the chaff. And how for us all that will come as a big surprise – that it mattered so much to him. It mattered so much to him that all would be well. That when we helped the least of these it was as if we were helping him. That when we gave food – it was like giving food to him. That when we gave drink – it was like giving drink to him. That when we clothed the naked – it was like clothing him. That when we welcomed the stranger – it was like welcoming him. That when we took care of the sick – it was like taking care of him. And when we visited the imprisoned – it was like visiting him.

This is what matters, he says. This is the wheat, the rest is chaff. All must be well.

It helps to explain on that Good Friday when Jesus, the Lamb of God is hoisted onto the cross, taking upon himself the sin of the world, pleading for the Father to forgive them for they don't know what they are doing – it helps to explain that when the Chief Priest's call up to the cross and say to Jesus, "Come on down ... save yourself ... it doesn't really matter. It doesn't really matter what you are doing up there!!" It helps to

explain why he doesn't come down. Why he takes the penalty. Why he bears the sin. Because the good news is ... it does matter. It matters a great deal. For what he begins he finishes. This is the good news.

And all shall be well.