

# How to Care for Each Other

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[ 0 : 00 ] I want to ask you this morning, how do you think you advance in the Christian life?! How do you get better at being a Christian?

Or in gaming terms, which some of you will relate with, how do you rank up?

How do you rank up as a Christian? We play a lot of games at home as a family together, board games, computer games.

And we found that some of our favorite games to play together are a particular genre of games called co-op games, cooperative games, where you have to work together to win the game.

We've got this one, for example, at home, it's a board game called Forbidden Island. And the board is an island made up of tiles, and you're each sort of characters on the island.

[ 1 : 00 ] But the island is slowly sinking into the sea, and you have to work together to get all these treasures off the island before it sinks. You each have a different role. One person is the pilot, one person is the diver, one person is the engineer, things like that.

And the only way you can advance in the game is by helping each other. It's a cooperative game. Well, the Bible teaches that the Christian life is like that.

Being a Christian is not a single player game. It's a co-op because you can only advance as a Christian in community with other Christians.

We just said in the Apostles' Creed, I believe in the fellowship of Christians. That doesn't mean Christians have coffee after the service. It means that what the New Testament teaches is that it is only through the fellowship of Christians that we grow as Christians.

And that is why Matthew 18, the chapter we now come to in the Gospel of Matthew, is actually all about relationships. The relationships we have with one another.

[ 2 : 07 ] That's what Matthew 18 is all about. And it's a vital chapter in Matthew 18. It's a vital chapter for us as Christians to really get into ourselves and get a handle on.

And so we're going to spend the next three Sundays just looking at this chapter, Matthew 18, about the relationships that Jesus teaches we are to have with one another.

But it's interesting how it starts. This morning we're looking at the first 14 verses. And right at the beginning it starts by Jesus teaching us firstly, before we even look at each other, how we are to see ourselves.

How you are to look at yourself. Because essentially that is at the root of how we relate to the people around us, is how we look at ourselves.

And so that's where Jesus starts. Let's have a look at how the whole thing begins from verse 1 of Matthew 18. At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

[ 3 : 15 ] Okay, let's pause there and think why they're asking this question. Now we immediately, we like jumping to the conclusion that the disciples were always asking dumb, selfish questions. But this question, in its context, is actually not unreasonable to ask, given what Jesus has just been teaching them.

If you were here last week, you'll remember at the end of chapter 17, Jesus teaches them amazing truths that those who believe in Him, those who have come to see who He is, the Messiah, actually become very, in very real terms, they become the children of God.

And they become citizens of heaven. That's what he's just been teaching, that they have this amazing status as, now as citizens of heaven, because they believe in who He is. And so it's natural to actually ask the question, Wow, okay, we're part of this new kingdom.

What are the rules for this new kingdom? How do you rank up in this new kingdom? So that's what they're essentially asking. And Jesus also, in His answer here, doesn't rebuke them for asking that

question.

He answers them, but He does say that advancement in this kingdom is very different to advancement in the world. The way you advance in this kingdom is not the way you advance in other areas of life in this world.

[ 4 : 37 ] And so He answers like this from verse 2. He called a little child to Him and placed the child among them, and He said, Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. More literally, the text says, Whoever humbles himself like this child is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Now what does that mean? What does He mean to humble yourself like this child? What is it about children? Well, one of the things universally about children, by nature, is that they are dependent on others.

Until children grow up and get to a certain age, they have to rely on other people. And in the culture of the day, Jesus' culture, that Israeli culture, children back then were not seen as very valuable, nearly as valuable as children are looked at in society today.

Back then, children were just seen as pretty useless, weak, helpless. They don't have much to contribute until they're older and they can come help you in the fields. Until then, they're really just wasting space.

[ 6 : 01 ] But you've got to keep them alive. They weren't well respected. They weren't well valued because they didn't have much to contribute. And so, it doesn't make much sense for Jesus to say, if you want to be great, you've got to be like a child.

That is completely counter-cultural and counter-instinctive. Surely, if you want to be great, if you want to advance, you've got to be strong. You've got to be competent. Like in every other area of our lives, in our work, in school, wherever you are, you've got to be good at what you do.

You've got to be competent. You've got to be independent to advance. Well, Jesus here is saying, not in the kingdom. Not in His kingdom.

No, in His kingdom, you advance by being weak. In His kingdom, you advance by realizing your dependence and your natural inability.

Like a child. That's how you advance in His kingdom. It's very upside down. It's very counter-intuitive. In fact, He says there in verse 3, you can't even enter the kingdom without first realizing this about yourself.

[ 7 : 23 ] Look at verse 3 again. Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. So they're asking, how do we advance in the kingdom of heaven? He's saying, let me just tell you, let me remind you how you enter the kingdom of heaven.

But think about that. Think about how someone enters the kingdom of God. How does someone get saved? If you're saved, if you're a Christian, and you're in relationship with God through Jesus Christ, how did that come about?

When did that happen? How did that happen? Well, it was, one way or another, only when you abandoned your own efforts, that you could rely on Christ and be saved, because that's what salvation is.

It's relying on what Jesus has done for us, not relying on our own works to save us, but relying on Jesus alone. It's what we've been doing in our service so far, when we've confessed our sins, and we've confessed that only through Jesus can we be saved.

That is how we first come into God's kingdom, realizing our own inability, and trusting in what Jesus did on the cross when He died for our sins.

[ 8 : 37 ] And so to be saved in its very nature is to humble yourself and admit your own inability. That's the only way anyone can even get into the kingdom, to be dependent, to humble themselves.

But here Jesus is saying, well, the same way you came in is the way you'll go on in the kingdom. You'll only advance in the Christian life by realizing your own inability to do so.

That is the only way you can go forward. The same way you came in. One of the greatest, if not the greatest, achievement in mountaineering is to summit Mount Everest.

Many people have died trying to do just that. You can actually, their bodies are still up there.

They're frozen in the snow. They haven't been able to take them down because they're too high up.

Many people have died. And often, those who have died have died because they were too confident in themselves. If you want to try summit Mount Everest, and I don't recommend it for any of us, but you've got to do your homework, you've got to do your research, you've got to train yourself.

[10:05] And the professionals say, it is essential, if you're going to succeed in summiting Mount Everest, it is essential that you firstly realize your limitations, secondly, that you rely on the equipment that you're given, but most of all, that you rely on your team.

You rely on the people around you because you can't do it by yourself. Well, the Christian life is the same. To grow as Christians, we've got to realize we can't do that by ourselves.

We're not strong enough. We need God, and we need what He provides more than we like to think we do. Because we are by nature, we pride ourselves in our independence, and our strength, and our abilities.

It's the way that our culture has programmed us as well. Especially kind of Western culture, it's very much about your strength, and your independence, and your ability to handle whatever life throws at you.

That's not how Christians go forward. But we don't like to think of ourselves as being dependent, being weak, being unable.

[11:28] But Jesus is saying here, that is the only way you can advance. You need what God provides you more than you think you do.

You need what's here, at church, more than you think you do. You need these sermons. You need this worship.

You need these people around you more than you think you do. more than you'd like to admit. And it's only when you realize that, and start relying on what God has given you in His church, that you can go forward.

That you can advance. But also then, you've got to realize, as you look around, and you see what God has given you, the means of grace that He's given you in His church, and His word, and His people, you've also then got to realize, oh, they need me too.

These people need you. You know, you don't only come to church for what you can get, because the people here need you to come to church for them as well.

[12:47] Something we often forget. But this is why Jesus then goes on in this chapter to talk about how we are called to look after each other.

And that is what the rest of the chapter is about. Once we get our understanding of ourselves right, now we've got to look at how do we actually look after each other in the community of those who follow Jesus.

And that's what Jesus goes on to teach us, looking after each other. And there's two ways Jesus says we need to do that here.

And I'll tell you what they are. The first is we've got to learn to protect each other. And the second is that we've got to learn to pursue each other. And that's what we're going to look at in turn.

Firstly, we've got to protect each other. We've got to learn to protect each other from our sin. And Jesus is very serious about this one.

[13:49] And you can see it with the language he uses. Let's look at what he says from verse 6. He says, If anyone causes one of these little ones, those who believe in me, to stumble.

Let's just pause there for a second. It's important we understand who he's talking about here. When he talks about these little ones, he's changed his vocabulary from talking about a child. He takes this child and then he's talking about children.

But now he changes to, it's a different word in the original, little ones. And these little ones, what he means by that is all his disciples, not just young children.

He's already used this word back in chapter 10. I'll just read it again. 10 verse 41 to 42. He says, and he's talking about the mission that he's going to send his disciples on.

He says, whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward. And whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. Verse 42, and if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones, who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.

[15:01] These little ones is a way Jesus refers to his disciples, those who are doing his mission, and those who are following him. All of them, irrespective of their age, because of their inherent

weakness and their dependence on him.

So he refers to his disciples as little ones. In Matthew. That song, that children's song, that goes, little ones to him belong, they are weak, and he is strong.

You know that one? You think it's talking about children, don't you? It's not. It's talking about all of us. These little ones are all of us who are weak while he is strong.

Anyway, so that's who Jesus is talking about here. Let's see what he says from verse 6. If anyone causes one of these little ones, those who believe in me, to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.

Whoa. You can see Jesus is serious about this. Verse 7. Woe to the world because of things that cause people to stumble. Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come.

[16:24] This is some of Jesus' strongest language. This is something that is very close to Jesus' heart because he hates it when people cause his disciples to sin.

His little ones. The ones he knows are vulnerable and weak. He hates it when other forces outside tempt them into sin, but he hates it especially if that comes from another disciple.

There's enough temptation out in the world you don't need it when you come to church as well. You don't need it from other Christians. But he's warning his own disciples here. He's saying to he's not this is not the whole crowd he's talking to.

The chapter started the disciples came to Jesus and they're having a conversation with him personally here. And he's warning his disciples against causing other disciples to sin because it turns out it's really easy for us to do.

We can lead each other into sin far more easily than we realize. We can cause each other to sin. We can do that in subtle ways.

[17:40] By just pushing each other's buttons. Triggering each other. this is especially true of siblings.

Am I right? Any of you who have siblings will know what I'm talking about. But actually it's very serious. The way we we proke and prod and trigger our siblings it's actually because of our evil sinful root inside us that wants to see our siblings fail to make ourselves feel better.

And so we trigger them. Spouses also do this. Especially when there's issues in the marriage they'll prod each other and push each other until the other one reacts sinfully and then the first one feels better about themselves.

You see it's all your fault it's not me. And that's we often do it we do it much more than we realize with people. We prod and we trigger so that they react badly so that we feel better about ourselves. We don't realize how often we do this. We're so used to it but we've got to realize how much God hates it when we do this to one of his children who he's trying to rescue from sin.

[19:05] Christians can also lead others to sin by physical temptation sexual temptation that's why the New Testament and this is something that we need to hear today more than ever the New Testament says we must dress modestly when we come to church.

We can even cause each other to sin by doing innocent things that are not themselves bad but they might be a weakness for a brother or sister like drinking alcohol around those who are alcoholics and those who struggle with that even if we don't struggle with that.

And even if that by itself is not a sin in moderation it might still be a stumbling block and so the New Testament teaches that we are not to exercise our freedoms if they are going to be stumbling blocks for others.

And then our own sins can lead others to sin especially if maybe they look up to you or you're an example for them or maybe just in the Christian community if a particular sin people kind of turn a blind eye to and it becomes acceptable in the community our own sins can be a cause of others to sin we've got to realize that as well and that's why Jesus says here we've got to be ruthless about our own sins that's what he goes on to talk about in again very strong language there from verse 8 if your foot causes you to stumble cut it off if your eye causes you to stumble gouge it out this is serious language you will recognize this though what he's talking about in this hyperbolic language he's taught about this before hasn't he back in chapter 5 of Matthew he said exactly the same thing but in a different context he said if your foot causes you to sin cut it off if your eye causes you to sin gouge it out and what he means by that by the way is he's not promoting self mutilation he is using metaphoric language to say you've got to cut out of your life anything that causes you habitual sin you can't use the grace of

God as an excuse to keep sinning because then actually it shows that he hasn't saved you from sin if it's still controlling you and so you've got to identify those things that cause you habitual sin and ruthlessly cut them out of your life but and he's spoken about this before but here what's interesting he now he now teaches that same teaching but in the context of caring for others caring for those around you in other words he's saying you've got to be ruthless against your sin like I've already taught you but not just for your own sake you've got to be ruthless against your sin for the sake of those around you too you've got to realize how vulnerable your brothers and sisters are to sin just as much as you are and you've got to protect them but also secondly that's why you must!

[ 22 : 19 ] pursue them listen to what he says from verse 10 see that you do not despise one of these little ones for I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my father in heaven what do you think if a man owns a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go look for the one that wandered off and if he finds it truly I tell you he's happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off in the same way your father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish Jesus is teaching us here something amazing about our God about his father in this little parable he's telling us that God pursues his people when they go astray and he uses the image of a shepherd whose one sheep has drifted off and he goes in search of that wherever he has to go to find that sheep and bring it back that is the heart of

God that is what Jesus is teaching us here he pursues his people when they go astray has he done that for you think of how he's done that for you when you were drifting when you were being pulled into sin when you were!

! God brought you back because if he didn't you would have been lost long ago if God didn't do this for his straying!

sheep will will will will and our own efforts it's God who seeks us out and brings us back when we drift if we are God's children he seeks us he goes after us he draws us he convicts us again he corrects us and he brings us back to the right path because he values each and every one of his little ones you know what he wants you to value them that way as well he wants you to value his children like he does because it turns out that the main way he pursues his people and he brings Christians back when they are drifting is how through other Christians right who are looking out for each other not just for themselves who are concerned about each other's spiritual state and spiritual progress when they're

Christians who when they see that their brother or sister who is normally a church is now not a church they don't just let that pass by they go I better phone them up I better check up I better send them a whatsapp and check how they're doing and encourage them because we know how vulnerable each other are we know that that's not just an innocent okay well I had something else to do often that's that's a temptation it's a it's a it's a slipping away it can happen so easily and if we realize that about us each other we will look out for each other that everything is okay it's encouraging them it's prodding them it's spurring each other on as the bible says spurring spurs are not comfortable they're the things that poke the backside of horses to keep them going forward bible says we must spur each other on and sometimes that's uncomfortable conversations but we do that because we know how vulnerable each other are to sin those mountain climbers that go up mount everest the guides also say when you're going up in a group that it is essential as you're ascending that you're not just focused on your own oxygen and your own strength that you're looking out for the people in your team that you're keeping tabs on them that you keep monitoring them that you're in constant communication with them that you keep!

[ 27 : 06 ] checking up on them because it's so easy for someone to fall behind without anyone else noticing unless you are constantly looking out for each other and so let me ask you how are you looking out for the person next to you as a Christian how are you looking out for other Christians this week ahead how are you going to be looking out for the progress of other Christians not just out for yourself what messages do you need to send to someone who maybe isn't here this morning what prayers do you need to pray for someone what meeting do you need to set up for coffee so that you can check what particular struggles or temptations they might be going through that you can pray for and that you can help you see God wants them to be valuable enough to you to take that time out to do because they're valuable to him no matter who they are if they are one of his little ones they are immensely valuable to him and they must be valuable to you too verse 10 look at it again see that you do not despise one of these little ones for

I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my father in heaven now whatever that means what Jesus is saying is that a child of God has great value in heaven no matter who they are on earth and so they should have great value to you no matter who they are I brought along my passport I don't know if you've ever read the front of your passport but let me read to you the front of the passport of a South African passport holder it says in very fancy font it says the president of the republic of South Africa requests all whom it may concern to allow the bearer of this passport to pass freely without let or hindrance and to afford the bearer all necessary assistance and protection that is what

God requires of all his citizens of heaven from you all necessary assistance and protection from you even if they're not important or valuable by worldly!

standards they must be valuable to you because they're valuable to him they're his little ones but ultimately we are to do all of this for each other and we're to make those efforts to protect and to pursue each other ultimately because it's what Jesus did for us he went to extreme lengths and he humbled himself and he gave of himself to pursue you and to pursue me and to put us ahead of himself listen to how Paul puts it in Philippians 2 from verse 5 he says in your relationships with one another have the same mindset as Christ Jesus who being in very nature God did not consider equality with God as something to be used to his own advantage rather he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant being made in human likeness and being found in appearance as a man he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death even death on a cross for you for me and because of that

Christians are instructed in in Philippians 2 verse 3 to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit rather in humility value others above yourselves not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others that that right there is the essence of advancing as a Christian advancing in the Christian life the essence of it is to see yourself as less and others as more and yet that is so contrary to our nature everything in our being does the opposite to that everything in our being is about making ourselves more and others less but to advance as a Christian it's the opposite it's you less others more it is contrary to our nature but it is what

[ 32 : 18 ] God values in his kingdom because it is who God is and so that is what makes for true greatness in his kingdom let's pray oh Lord we thank you for this reminder that you the great shepherd seek your lost sheep when they go astray we praise you Lord because without that we would all be lost long ago we praise you that you value your lost sheep you value your little ones sinners as we are Lord by your grace you love your children and Lord help us to value each other the same way help us Lord in the coming weeks to learn how better to protect each other and to pursue each other in

Jesus name Amen