

Jesus teaches about relationships with other Christians

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Matthew 18:1-14

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We don't go to school to learn how to do them. We don't formally sign up for them. We don't get certificates for doing them well. We can have lots of them or hardly any. We have to do them. We are immersed in them from the moment we are born. We learn how to do them by trial and error and by teaching from our parents. We can do them well or badly. We can experience out of this world joy through them or soul crushing sadness in them. Our ability or inability with them can impact so many other parts of our lives.

What are they? Relationships. A relationship is some sort of connection with another person. We have them in school, work, buying and selling, on a team, marriage, parents and kids, siblings, extended family, dating, medical, legal, social and with God. Everyone here has experience in relationships – some positive – some negative. How are you doing in your relationships today?

Most of us would probably have a mix of answers. In some of your relationships things are going well. In another relationship, it might be stagnant or dead. This one over here is actually unhealthy but we don't really want to deal with it. That one over there – well we just avoid that person.

When it comes to relationships in our world today, what might be a common set of expectations that most people would agree to? Here's my best shot after almost 53 years of observation and learning. When it comes to school, team, scholarships, business and career you have to fight and scratch to gain position. You have to put yourself forward, win the competition and gain prestige. In social relationships if something feels good do it for yourself and with others. If you have a conflict with someone gather up your strength to have a big fight or avoid them, talk behind their back. If someone wrongs you, they need to pay. If they don't its okay to hold a life-long grudge against them. Now some of that is not very nice on the surface but it's my observation that these expectations are commonly practiced. In fact, I've practiced them in some of relationships over the years.

But what if none of these common practices were acceptable to Jesus? What if He commands His followers to something very different in relationships, especially when it comes to one another? Today friends, we are going to discover that **Jesus' command to drastically different relationships requires drawing closer to Him**. Jesus teaches and expects His followers to relate to one another in a dramatically different way than is common in the world.

This is found in the fourth major section of Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of Matthew. Each section contained instruction on different aspects of discipleship. In Matthew 5-7, Jesus instructed us on every day discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 10, he instructed us about missionary discipleship. In Matthew 13 we studied the parables and life as marginalized disciples. Now in chapter 18, we will learn about church community discipleship or relationships with one another. The last section of His teaching will be on end times focused discipleship in Matthew 24 and 25. How do we live as disciples in light of the imminent return of Jesus Christ?

As we have seen with all of Jesus' teaching, He expects something very different from His disciples, from us when it comes to relationships with one another. Today, we're just going to start this passage. We'll do the first third of the chapter. Justin will take you through the last two thirds while I am off on some vacation time. Today, I want you to see what Jesus commands regarding relationships with one another and the encouragement He provides to help us live out these commands.

Matthew 18:1-14 (ESV)

18 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" ²And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them ³and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

⁵"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

⁷"Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!⁸ And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

¹⁰"See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. ¹²What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

Jesus' teaching about relationships in the Christian community is prompted by a question that seems to have nothing to do with relationships. We might have expected the disciples to ask "tell us how we are to relate to one another in the coming kingdom?" But instead, the disciples have a crass and basic question. "Who is the greatest in the

kingdom of heaven?” Where did this question come from? Well, remember Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven. They have their ideas about how this kingdom will work. And it’s pretty much like any earthly kingdom. Messiah would be king. But he would need lots of cabinet ministers and advisors and rulers of chunks of the kingdom. They want the best positions. Jesus has been telling them that this kingdom will involve Messiah’s suffering, death, resurrection and triumph. But they still seem to think in either/or terms. Either Messiah will suffer and die or He (and his disciples) will be triumphant and victorious.

It is likely the disciples have the triumphant version in mind when they ask the question, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” is like asking parents, “who is your favorite child or best child?” After all, that’s what you do in certain situations. You jockey for position and try to get noticed by the important people.

But how does this lead to a discussion on community life? Well, if the greatest people in God’s kingdom are those who jostle, fight, influence and bribe their way to the top, that will impact relationships. The church will look pretty much like the world. There will be the top person and their family and followers. There will be contenders for the top position that will come along and try to knock the greatest person from their pedestal. So church relationships will consist of rivalry, power-grabbing and politics. Based on some of the New Testament letters especially to the Corinthians, that’s exactly what happened in the church. But Jesus’ answer will show something profoundly different than this expected relational dynamic.

Jesus takes a little child and places the boy in the middle of them. We’re probably talking about a 2 to 4 year old. Jesus declares, “Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

So the first key to relationships in the kingdom of heaven and in the church is we must **Turn and humble ourselves. (18:1-4)** Now adopt an attitude of normality, this must have shocked the disciples. Children held no status in that society. Though parents loved their kids and community families would likely look out for each other’s kids, there was no consideration given to children by government or by adults. There was no funding for children’s schools. Only the rich or royal could be trained in the skills of governing. There were no playgrounds or parks for kids. Children were to be seen and not heard. One commentator notes that because of the high infant mortality rates, some parents would even reserve emotional attachment to a child until they were sure the child would survive.

So if you wanted to identify the least powerful and influential group of people in that society, you couldn't get much lower than children. Even slaves had different levels of status among their masters. Yet Jesus says the disciples must turn and become like children. The word turn here is the same word for repent. It involves a drastic reorientation of perspective. But how are we to become like children when it comes to our relationships with each other? Jesus says "whoever humbles himself like this child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Now how many of you know or had children, toddlers who were 2 or 3 or 4 who naturally humbled themselves. They're in the nursery or the play room with their siblings or playmates and you hear them say, "oh, why don't you play with the toy first. I don't mind." Or "you are welcome to play with my private collection of blocks or animals." Does that sound like a toddler room to you? I am more familiar with hearing sounds like "mine," or high pitched squealing because older brother is holding the only toy I want to play with at arm's length and out of my reach. Most children are not naturally humble.

So Jesus must be talking about something common to all children that doesn't have to do with their own character or personality. What could this be? One possibility could be an acceptance of insignificance. Though toddlers can be somewhat selfish and grabby, they don't show much concern about whether or not they are well known. They basically want to go about discovering life with as few obstacles as possible in their way. They don't look at their phones, (hopefully they don't have phones) to check how many likes they have or followers. They just want to play and discover. So maybe the humility Jesus talks about here is an acceptance of insignificance in the church.

Another possibility is recognizing one's dependence on others. Though toddlers like to exercise their independence and some protest loudly when they don't get their way, they also completely depend on Mom and Dad or their caregiver to get food on the table. They don't know how to cook or go out and make money. They recognize someone has to get them their food. A humble disciple recognizes their dependence upon God and others in the community to go through life.

One other possible meaning for "humble like a child" is a child-like indifference to greatness. Young children up to ages 3 and 4 don't care who wins the US election. They don't sit in their cribs at night muttering "Donald or Hilary." They aren't impressed with some great athlete or some movie star or singer. They just want someone to love them and

guide them and help them along in life. If we get caught up in celebrity pastors or knowing people of influence or famous people or becoming famous as a church, our relationships can look quite different.

So there are several ways we can be humble ourselves like children in our relationships with one another. We accept insignificance. We admit our needs to depend on others and mostly our Lord. We don't get caught up in worldly standards of greatness. Jesus modeled this throughout His life by spending most of his ministry away from the power centers and among the poor.

Now how might we actually turn and become like little children. I think it was C.S. Lewis who wrote we have to adopt a second naivete or naïve perspective. To be naïve means to be simple; trusting; innocent; inexperienced. Young children are naïve about the things of life. They don't worry about politics or world affairs. They trust their parents and people who care for them usually without question. They don't know much about the evil things people can do or harmful ways people can treat one another. They don't have experience in some of the hard ways of life.

We were all once naïve like children. We have all gone through various stages of life with experiences. The more we experience life and pass the years the less naïve we become. We recognize the complexity of issues and people. We are less trusting. We paint innocence as a negative quality. We try to delete "inexperience" from our resumes.

We do this with God. We have hundreds of questions about life, the world, suffering and evil and our lives. But there comes a point where we must realize we won't get all the answers. We can't figure out everything on our own. We can't resolve situations completely. Or we experience people we can't change to our liking. We're not as in control as we thought we were. So we need to come to God with a second naïvete of simplicity, trust, innocence and inexperience about the ways of God and the complexities of life. We have to learn to entrust these things to the Lord and discern what He calls and empowers us to do in the situations before us. So Jesus commands us to turn and humble ourselves like children in our relationships with one another.

Jesus goes on to explain another drastically different approach to church family relationships. We must **Seriously guard against temptation to others and self. (18:5-9)** Jesus continues with the child theme in verse 5. "Whoever receives one such child in my name, receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth

of the sea.” When you see little one or child in the rest of this passage, think of other Christians. We are all “little ones” here.

Jesus says that we must be very serious about guarding against causing someone else to sin. It is so serious that Jesus says it would be better to drown in the ocean than face what’s coming in judgment for those who influence others to sin. Friends, how seriously do you take your responsibility to not cause someone else to sin?

Sin and temptation are part of life in this world. Jesus admits that in verse 7. “Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!” Are we concerned about being an agent of temptation for others? Or are we like the common attitude today which is reflected in statements like “what’s the big deal? Everybody does that. Don’t be so stuffy. You’re a dinosaur. You’re living in the ice age.” Certainly, some Christians go overboard in prescribing what is and isn’t sin. But if we have a “whatever” attitude towards sin, we need to heed Jesus’ stark warning. I don’t want to be on the receiving end of a “Woe” from the all-powerful risen Christ. It will be no joke on Judgement day when we realize that our casual influence of someone away from Christ led to horrific results.

If we’re going to guard against causing others to sin, we have to start with ourselves. In one of the most famous but misunderstood sayings of Jesus, He commands us to take drastic steps to stay away from sin. Verse 8 – “And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, or one foot or one hand than then to have two and be thrown into the hell of fire.”

Now has Jesus just lost it for a minute? Who instructs people to chop off hands and feet or tear out eyes? Does this mean we need to start a new ministry this fall – the foot chopping, hand cutting, eye gouging ministry?

No! Jesus uses extreme language to make the point that we must take radical measures to stay away from sin. Avoiding hell is worth any price. Avoiding hell is worth a drastic lifestyle change.

Jesus calls us to build a fence around sin – not try to get as close to a sin as possible without actually doing it. When they build fences around power stations, the fences are pretty far away. They don’t build them right beside the uncovered electrical lines. Why? Because people would go up to the fence and reach through it just to see what it

would be like to touch all that electricity. But what do we do? We try to get as close to sin as possible to satisfy our curiosity while somehow maintaining our relationship with God.

Disciples must take seriously their responsibility to guard against causing or influencing others to sin. We must guard against sinning ourselves because sin hurts relationships and community.

Jesus goes on to describe one final drastically different expectation of relationships in the last verses of our passage today. He starts in verse 10, by warning against despising little ones. Remember little ones are other Christians. To despise means to look down upon, scorn and treat with contempt. People do that all the time in worldly relationships. But Christians have to grow up to look beyond how a person looks, dresses, talks or acts to who they are in Christ.

But Jesus does not only command “no despising.” He provides a pretty solid reason. “For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father.” Don’t look down on other Christians because angels that watch over them are in God’s presence. It’s like God will hear about it or God has informers that will draw His attention to one disciple despising another.

Does this mean that every person has a guardian angel? Or does it mean that children have a specific guardian angel assigned to them? Maybe. We can’t be sure. The Bible doesn’t give us a clear picture about how angels are organized or function. We just get glimpses here and there. Jesus gives us one here about angels who watch over Christians.

But Jesus goes further than forbidding the despising of other believers. He shows us God’s heart for wandering disciples. He talks about a shepherd who will leave a flock of 99 to go look for a stray. He talks about how joyful that shepherd is when the stray is found. God has a big heart for wandering disciples. **Gain God’s heart for wandering disciples. (18:10-14)**

Who do you know that once confessed Christ but no longer connects with a church community and other believers? How can you show God’s heart to them? Are we praying for them, encouraging them and meeting with them?

So we’ve seen Jesus commands regarding relationships with one another. But we know these are easier read than done. Most Christians and people know about the expectation of a higher standard of relationships within the Christian

community. But most Christians have experiences with other Christians that are tough. I've heard people say "I couldn't believe my supposed Christian brothers or sisters in Christ treated me like that or did that."

We need to recognize that we are still sinners. The relationships Jesus calls us to require loads of maturity and growth that doesn't come unless we connect to Him. So we need to ask Him for patience with others and ask others for patience with us. We also need to ask Christ for the strength to forgive others and reconcile.

I realize this is no simple journey for some who have been grievously wounded by others. So how do we deal with our own hurt caused by other Christians?

One way we can deal with this is to spend a lot of time with Jesus at the cross. When you spend time there, any unhealthy pride and self-justification in ourselves will melt away. We can begin to grasp the magnitude of our own sin and the steep, immeasurable price Christ paid to atone for it. But we also gain a sense of the price paid for the sins of other believers. We also see how serious Jesus was in dealing with their sin. Therefore, we can gain power and strength from the Lord to move ahead.

Another way we can stop the negative cycle of focusing on how much we've been hurt is to praise God for who He is and what He has done and is doing in our lives. Tim Keller writes – *"What do we do when we are afflicted and in pain? Usually, we give in to self-pity, bitterness, fear or envy. David however, does not fall into these things because he has an understanding of life that encompasses suffering – he uses it to glorify God. Praise to God is an antidote to the self-absorption that can overtake us when we suffer. This not only honors God but also encourages others. When suffering, don't get sucked down into yourself – turn outward in praise to God and minister to those in need."* Keller – Songs of Jesus, 157.

Another helpful reminder comes from Henry Cloud in one of his boundaries books. He writes "a woman came up to me at a recent seminar and said, 'I know I'm supposed to forgive, but, I just can't open myself up to that kind of hurt anymore. I know I should forgive him and trust him, but if I let him back in, the same thing will happen, and I can't go through that again."

Cloud answers "Who said anything about 'trusting' him?" "I don't think you should trust him either."

"But you said I was supposed to forgive him, and if I do that, doesn't that mean giving him another chance?

Don't I have to open up to him again?"

“No, you don’t,” I replied. “Forgiveness and trust are two totally different things. In fact, that’s part of your problem. Every time he’s done this, he’s come back and apologized, and you have just accepted him right back into your life, and nothing has changed. You trusted him, nothing was different, and he did it again. I don’t think that’s wise.”

“Well,” she asked, “How can I forgive him without opening myself up to being hurt again?”

Cloud writes, “We hear this problem over and over again. People have been hurt, and they do one of two things. Either they confront the other person about something that has happened, the other person says they’re sorry, and they forgive, open themselves up again, and blindly trust. Or, in fear of opening themselves up again, they avoid the conversation altogether and hold onto the hurt, fearing that forgiveness will make them vulnerable once again.

How do you resolve this dilemma? The simplest way to help you to organize your thoughts as you confront this problem is to remember three points:

1. Forgiveness has to do with the past. Forgiveness is not holding something someone has done against you. It is letting it go. It only takes one to offer forgiveness. And just as God has offered forgiveness to everyone, we are expected to do the same (see [Matthew 6:12&18:35](#)).

2. Reconciliation has to do with the present. It occurs when the other person apologizes and accepts forgiveness. It takes two to reconcile.

3. Trust has to do with the future. It deals with both what you will risk happening again and what you will open yourself up to. A person must show through his or her actions that they are trustworthy before you trust them again (see [Matthew 3:8](#); [Proverbs 4:23](#)).

You could have a conversation that deals with two of these issues, or all three. In some good boundary conversations, you forgive the other person for the past, reconcile in the present, and then discuss what the limits of trust will be in the future. The main point is this: Keep the future clearly differentiated from the past. This all points to our need to come to Jesus to live this out. We aren’t going to have drastically different relationships by listening to one message and taking down some notes. **Jesus’ command to drastically different relationships requires drawing closer to Him.** To live out Jesus commands requires a reorientation of their understanding of greatness, a transformation of heart attitude towards temptation and a transformation of heart attitude towards Christians we despise or those who

have wandered. Since Jesus commands us to have drastically different relationships with one another, we must turn to Him to change and empower us to live out this calling.

I love how Walter Marshall puts this. He was a pastor, kind of a colleague of mine who lived a few years ago in 1692. He talks about how we actually go about changing. He writes “God calls us to diligently use the means of grace He has given to us. A mean of grace is something that the Bible talks about whereby God pours His grace and power into our lives. Means of Grace include Reading and Meditation on the Word of God; examining yourself and repenting of your sins; participating in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper; praying; fasting; worshipping God; involvement in a local church. The means of grace do not make us holy. They bring us into deeper fellowship with Christ and he makes us holy.”

So maybe you’ll take Walter’s word for it if you’re getting sick of me. Through Bible reading and meditation and prayer and church community we draw closer to Christ. He changes us and empowers us to do drastically different relationships.

So where do you need Jesus’ help today? Do you need Him to change you so you can humble yourself like a child to accept insignificance and ignore worldly greatness? Do you need His help to stop tempting others to sin or stop sinning yourself? Do you need Him to change you so you stop despising that other Christian or you start caring for that wandering one? Do you need His help to sort out forgiveness, reconciliation and trust in a relationship? Or do you need to turn and become like a child towards Christ for the very first time? Will you turn away from self-sufficiency and your old way of doing life and turn to Christ as your Savior, Lord and helper?