

CHECKERS
Matthew 14:25-33

Games People Play Message Series
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Checkers is a popular game that has roots back to ancient times. In fact archaeological digs have found boards and pieces of a predecessor game that goes back to 600 BC; they have even found images of this early game that were carved into temple walls going back to 1400 BC.

It was enjoyed by the ancient Egyptians; mentioned by both Plato and Homer; it even made its way to India. Even though we don't know how exactly the ancients played, what they do know is that it strongly resembles modern checkers.

Some interesting trivia about this game is that it is only in North America that this game is called Checkers. In most other English speaking places it is called Draughts. Many countries around the world seem to have their own name for this game as well as their own rules and playing board. Needless to say it is a very popular game.

When I think of Checkers I often think about the café in the little town of Maynard where I started my ministry as a pastor. In this small town café there were some older retired farmers along with some town's people who would play Checkers by the hour.

They would sit by a table; drink their cup of coffee; would play this game with a limited amount of dialogue. One would say, *"Yep, the crops look pretty good this year."* Another would respond, *"Yep, they sure do."* A pretty laid back experience.

Therefore I have always thought of Checkers as kind of a simple; routine; fairly predictable game. It doesn't take a lot of thinking or strategy. It can be competitive (with tournaments) but can also be pretty laid back. It is most of the time a pretty non-threatening encounter.

In our lives today, with all the challenges and stresses on time, there are some who may actually long for a Checkers kind of life; a more laid back kind of existence. Some may long for a more predictable; a less threatening existence. Sitting and playing checkers often sounds pretty good.

In the chaos of life some may actually strive to keep things routine. It seems easier if we get up at the same time each day; follow the same morning routine; keep a fairly similar structure to our work day or retirement; stay connected to the same friends; do the same recreations, etc.

That may be why then the call of Jesus to serve him in new ways; to get more involved in his mission may come as something intrusive/disruptive. You may feel that you like your worship routine; your involvement with kids; your helping to serve periodically is enough. Why would you want to take on a new challenge?

An important truth however is that the only way you grow as a Christian is to venture out in faith; try new things; seek to develop your often hidden gifts. A simple Checkers kind of existence does not usually stretch you in new ways; does not open you up to new possibilities.

Isaiah 55:8-9 says, *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.’”*

Isaiah declares that God has a higher purpose for your life than just a routine, in the box, Checkers kind of life. His ways and thoughts are definitely higher than our ways; only he can help you discover this amazing life serving in his kingdom. God’s ways are greater and more amazing than you can ever imagine.

Remember the story of the disciple Peter in Matthew 14:25-33. When he saw Jesus walking on the water; when Jesus called for him to come Peter stepped out of the boat and began walking on the water toward Jesus. It was truly a miracle.

However when Peter began to take his eyes off Jesus; when he began to focus on his own thoughts about how impossible this was for him to be doing; when he allowed the wind and waves to bring fear to his heart he began to sink into the deep sea.

Ah but when Peter turned his eyes back on Jesus; when he called out to him, *“Lord, save me,”* Jesus reached out his hand; caught him; and then lifted him on top of the water again. Jesus then said to Peter, *“You of little faith, why did you doubt?”*

An amazing truth is that the times the Holy Spirit calls you out of your Checkers kind of life; the times the Holy Spirit calls you into a life of greater faith and service for Christ; how it is very much like getting out of a boat into some strong/turbulent waters. It can be very scary.

In the same way focusing on your own power; on your own understanding it is easy to sink; to feel like you are drowning in the challenge. It seems like once you have been scared; once you have floundered in such a situation you may exclaim, *“Never again.”* It is then you may want to go back to your more routine Checkers kind of life.

However the truth of God’s mission; the truth of his Biblical message is that he continually calls you out of your comfort zones to follow him. He calls you to step out far enough so you have to rely on him for strength and support. God’s ways of course are greater than your ways.

Throughout my years of ministry (and here at Messiah) I have seen this reality come true many times in the lives of so many people. There are people sitting here today (perhaps it is you) who have taken some steps of faith into a leadership position.

Perhaps you have taken some steps into getting involved in a mission opportunity; into a more public thing like reading lessons in church; teaching/mentoring children and youth: being involved in a task team. Perhaps coming to church may be *“getting out of the boat”* for you.

There are some of you who have also taken some steps to become part of a small group at Messiah’s Lenten learning series; some of you have even agreed to be a facilitator. Perhaps for some of you this initially was almost as scary as walking on water on a stormy sea.

What are they going to ask me? Am I going to be humiliated because I don't know my Bible very well? What if the other people realize that I am not a perfect person? Wouldn't it be much easier to live more of an isolated; predictable; Checkers kind of life?

Yet there are wonderful testimonies of people here at Messiah who have answered God's call; have gotten out of the boat; have grown immensely in their faith and life. Even when they felt somewhat afraid and unsure they have prayed and allowed Jesus lift them to new opportunities.

Something important to remember about being a disciple of Jesus is that it is not simply someone who believes in certain things so they will get into heaven when they die. Rather, a disciple is someone who says, *"It is my ultimate goal to live the way Jesus would live."*

Therefore Jesus always calls his disciples to get out of the boat. To be his disciple means to always be a learner and a student; to choose each day to grow in Christ. And growth always means entering into new territory; getting out of the boat; following his call to come.

I know that here at Messiah (in my life as your pastor) God calls us to continue to get out of our boats and follow him. It is so easy for churches to get comfortable; to be pew potatoes; to let fear prevent us from venturing out in new ways. Why not take the easy road?

Yet this past year our congregation decided to step out of the boat again seeking to call a new pastor. We also decided to call Camilla to our staff; to seek to multiply our programs; to move out in new ways to seek, connect and impact our community for Jesus.

Are there times we may feel nervous about taking these bold steps? Yes, definitely. Will there be times we may feel as if we are sinking as we trust that more people will be involved; as we trust that increased budget needs will be met; as we trust that God will lead us as we grow his mission? Yes, there may certainly be times we may feel overwhelmed by the challenge.

Yet something we have often seen at Messiah is that as we have tried to step out and be faithful to God's call is that God has blessed our congregation many times over as we have had to rely completely on him. In fact we are an amazing faith-centered community today because we stepped far enough out of the boat to truly trust Jesus.

Our solid hope and confidence for this next year and beyond is really centered in more people like you stepping out of your boat with your eyes on Jesus; your trust completely in him. It is dependent on more people like you stepping out in faith and growing in your praise and renewal in worship; in your mission involvement; in your witness to others; in your faithful growth in giving and the stewardship of your life.

It is amazing to think about our congregation stepping out of our comfortable boats with a solid faith in Jesus; it is amazing to think of more and more people like you stepping into Christ's mission and service. This has the power to radically change your life; the power to continue to bring renewal to this congregation in many miraculous ways.

Jesus is calling you today my friend. May the Holy Spirit empower you to answer this call and step out in faith. Believe me; as you leave your life and steps in Jesus' hands; as you keep your eyes on him you will never be the same again. Come to Jesus!