

A Perverse Generation

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Text: Matthew 17:14-27

The first thing I want to do this morning is to define some terms. Because of the problem of translation and the dynamics of living languages, some words have a different meaning to us than they meant to the writers of Scripture. Even in English, some words have changed meaning so that what you read in the King James Version, in Elizabethan English, does not mean the same thing today in 21st century American English. A great example is the word *suffer*, as in *Suffer the little children ...* (Mt. 19:14). Today, *suffer* has to do with pain, with undergoing trials, but then the word meant to allow, to put up with. So Jesus was telling his disciples to bring the children to him, to allow children to come to him, to put with children getting in the way. Because the kingdom belongs to them, too, and we'll get to that in a few weeks, children are to be included in the life of the church. They are not to be shuttled off to Children's Church, but discipled and taught to worship right alongside their parents. They have as much right to Jesus as we do. And so, in our text, there are a couple words that we need to define.

The first one is *generation*, from the Greek γενεά (genea), meaning family, clan, kind - essentially a group of people who have the same origin or are related by origin. We have come to think of generation as a group of people born in the same era, as the Baby Boomers, the post World War II generation, the Busters, Generation X, the Millennials, etc. So when Jesus commented about *this generation*, end-times enthusiasts started counting the end times from 1948 and the founding of the modern state of Israel to predict the Rapture as happening in 1988. Obviously, they were wrong. But Jesus wasn't talking about people born at the same time, but about people with the same origin, the same race or clan. So, *generation* refers to people, not to time. That's vital.

The second word we need to understand is the word *perverse*. We tend to think of it in terms of certain sinful behaviors, and you know immediately what I'm talking about. But Jesus' word is a Greek word (δυστρέφω - diastrefo) that means crooked, misshapen, and in the moral sense, depraved, partially the way we think of it but referring to an attitude or mind-set rather than to a particular sort of behavior. We may think of sins of the flesh, but Jesus was thinking of having a crooked view of the law and of God. Even people today, who may think of themselves as good people and who are not involved in what we consider perverse behaviors, are nonetheless depraved in their understanding of God, their world-view misshapen by false ideas and sin. They find it easy to justify or rationalize immorality because they misunderstand God's love, justice, and holiness. They have created God in their own image and after their own desire. Understand, then, that when Jesus accused the Jews of being a *perverse generation*, he was not accusing them of particular behaviors, but of wrong thinking. We'll come back to this in a moment.

Let's set the stage. Jesus has just come down from the Transfiguration with Peter, James, and John, and joined the other disciples. While Jesus was away, apparently, a man sought out the disciples of Jesus, begging them to heal his son of a seizure disorder. They could not. So now, as Jesus joins them and the crowds gather, the man brings his son to Jesus and relates both his son's need and the disciples' inability to heal him. It appears that Jesus addresses the disciples, and keep in mind that they have seen Jesus heal the sick, restore sight to the blind, cleanse lepers, feed the thousands, walk on water, and raise the dead. Add this to that: way back in chapter 10, Jesus empowered them and sent them out to minister on his behalf. He told them, Matthew 10, verse 4, "*Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.*" Jesus gave them the ability, power, and authority to heal the sick. But for all that, there is a problem. They either forgot, or they didn't believe him.

And Jesus accuses them of the latter. After Jesus calmed the storm, he accused the disciples of having small faith. If you recall, the word he used means "little faiths" – "*O, you of little faith.*" Here he accuses them of having no faith. They are without faith, unbelieving. They are not of little faith, they are faithless. Having been with Jesus ... Having been first-hand witnesses ... Having themselves been empowered by Jesus ... They are no better off. They are as if they had never known him at all. They are not unable to heal because they have a small faith, but because they have no faith at all. Here's an important point, and Jesus will expand on it: I confess to you that I have small faith. But my faith is in a great God. I cannot claim to be a man of great faith, but only that I serve a great God. I am weak and unstable. He is strong enough and the Rock upon which I can stand secure. There is a very great difference between little faith and none at all. I am a believer, but I struggle sometimes and call on God to strengthen me, to strengthen my faith, to hold me fast when I doubt.

However, not only are they unbelieving, they are also afflicted with a wrong way of thinking. It's not just unbelief; it's also misunderstanding. *Perverse* here does not mean overtly sinful in behavior. Merriam-Webster defines *perverse* as "turned away from what is right or good; corrupt." It isn't necessarily behavior, but also refers to someone who is argumentative, who takes a *perverse* delight in disagreement. It may be corrupted thinking, misunderstanding, or having a contrary view of things. We may all be in that boat to some degree. Later, Jesus would promise that the Holy Spirit would change our understanding regarding sin, judgment, and righteousness (Jn 16:8) – he will *convict the world*, or *prove the world wrong*, regarding spiritual matters. We take sin far too lightly; we forget or ignore the fact that God is not only loving but also our Judge; and we often think that being good is good enough. We focus on happiness while God is calling us to holiness. The disciples were perverse because they thought wrongly about Jesus and about spiritual matters. Their question, by the way, exposes them – "Why couldn't WE cast it out?" – as if the power lay in their own hands, their own abilities.

Jesus calls on the father to bring his son. Jesus heals the child and the happy family goes on their way. The bewildered disciples then come to Jesus with their desperate question: why were we unable to heal? Why were we unable to drive out the demon? Why were we helpless in the moment? Jesus' answer to them informs us and our faith also. One quick note: In Mark's rendition of this story, Jesus tells them, "*This kind can come out only by prayer*" (Mk 9:29), and some

manuscripts add, “and fasting.” That’s a topic for another time. In Matthew, Jesus is dealing with faith, not prayer, and I’m not ignoring the connection between the two. Jesus’ focus here is on their faith, on the right way to think.

The disciples’ problem was lack of faith, and after accusing them of having no faith, now he softens and answers their question, “Because you have little faith.” Your faith is small. But listen, small faith is better than none. And small faith can make a great difference. Jesus uses the mustard seed once again, but this time it represents faith (before it represented the Kingdom). If your faith is small, you can still move mountains – because it doesn’t really depend on the size of your faith, the amount of faith you have, or however one may measure faith. It depends on where your faith is placed. Is your faith in yourself, in your own ability, your own understanding, your own strength? You will fall and you will fail. But if your faith, however small, is in God, you will be unstoppable. Place your faith squarely in a great God, for whom nothing will be impossible. The angel asked Abraham, “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (Gen 18:14). Jeremiah reflecting on creation cried out to God, “Nothing is too hard for you.” and God responded, “I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?” (Jer 32:17, 27). Place your faith in the God for whom nothing is impossible.

Matthew then presents us with a second example of perverse thinking, one that afflicts many people, not just Christians, today. It is the relationship of government and faith, and I’m not speaking of “faith in the government.” That’s something else entirely. In the US, it takes the form of the separation of church and state, and exactly what that entails. The example presented in our text is that of taxation, and here’s the problem:

The Jews were an occupied nation, under the control of the Roman empire and Roman officials, some of whom were heavy-handed tyrants. The “rules” allowed Roman soldiers and officials to do pretty much what they wanted to the occupied people. They could take their crops and their animals. They could conscript them for labor, including carrying their heavy field packs. There were limits, but they were mainly in place to keep the peace. Punishment for crimes was harsh for the subject people and unfairly enforced because the Romans or their collaborators were not punished as harshly or at all for the same crimes. But the Jews were pretty much able to live their lives in relative peace so long as they paid the required tax. We’ll get to the Roman tax later on.

Here, though, Matthew relates that the issue is a temple tax. This goes all the way back to Exodus 30. There, God told Moses that every male over twenty years of age was *to give a half shekel as an offering to the LORD*. It was equal across the board, the same for rich or poor. In Exodus it was called *atonement money given for the service of the tent of meeting* (Ex 30:11-16). After the temple was built and into the Roman era, that “offering” morphed into an equivalent “temple tax” of two drachmas a year, roughly the equivalent of \$10. It doesn’t seem like much at first glance, but it yielded so much revenue to the temple coffers that the priests began constructing a golden vine to decorate the temple pillars, adding to it as the money flowed.

Part of the reason for the question is that some sects refused to pay the temple tax. They considered the whole system corrupt. It then became a test of loyalty to Torah and to the temple itself as the house of God that one paid the tax. There were, just as there are today, those who rebel

against paying taxes at all, regardless of their purpose. By the way, back to Exodus 30, this was atonement money – to be *a memorial ... before the LORD, making atonement for your lives*. The offering was originally intended to be a kind of covenant offering, a reminder of the relationship Israel was to have with God. So, the question is, will Jesus honor God by remembering the covenant? On the surface, the answer is yes. But Jesus uses this as an opportunity to teach a right way of thinking.

“From whom do the kings of the earth collect taxes – from their own children or from others?” The fact is that the children of the king benefit from the taxes paid by others. The children live as their father does from the proceeds. The children don’t pay themselves, so they are exempt from the tax. It is others, from outside the royal family who pay.

Now, pause a moment to put this into the context of what Matthew has been trying to show: First, Jesus is the fulfilment of the prophecies. He is the promised Messiah. Second, Jesus has come to inaugurate his kingdom. We have already heard a few of the kingdom parables – the kingdom is like ... – and there are more to come. If Jesus is inaugurating his kingdom, it stands to reason that he is the king. When his mother and brothers came looking for him, do you recall what he said? Matthew 12:48-49 – *Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”* If Jesus is the king, and if those who do the will of God are brother, sister, mother to the king, it follows that we are exempt. The royal family does not pay the tax.

But, catch this clearly — *“But so that we may not cause offense ...”* we pay the tax anyway. The right way to think is to understand that even though we are children of the king, and citizens of his coming kingdom, we also have to live in this world. We have to get along in this world. Our job is to build bridges to the kingdom, not walls around it. If we are offensive, if we put people off, if we boast about our status, if we expect exceptions, if we use our faith as a way to avoid consequences ... we may turn people away from the king and his kingdom. We don’t go to work and demand privilege because we are Christian. We don’t parade our righteousness. *So that we may not cause offense*, our faith becomes an invitation, and a bridge for someone else to cross. It is *perverse* to think that we don’t have to participate in the world, we don’t have to work as hard, or “pay the temple tax”, just because we are Christians. *So that we may not cause offense*, play by the rules.