

“This Evil Generation”
Matthew 12:38-50
April 8, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

In the passage before us today, Jesus declares his generation to be an “evil and adulterous generation.” He declares this twice, and I consider this to be the theme of this passage. This chapter has described multiple controversies Jesus has had with the Jewish leaders, beginning with the Sabbath controversies and then moving to the controversy concerning the source of his power, which those leaders claimed to be Satanic. Jesus now gives his assessment of the situation by declaring the problem to be the evil hearts he has encountered in this generation.

There are several things that are striking about Jesus’ assessment. The first is that he refers to an evil generation and not just to evil individuals. An evil generation produces evil individuals as diseased soil produces diseased plants. It is the same today. Jesus believed in evil systems that make it more likely that the people existing within those systems are going to grow up to be evil themselves. The three great enemies we face are the world, the flesh (meaning our sinful natures) and the devil. The idea of an evil generation speaks to the first of those.

The second thing that is striking to me about this is how things haven’t changed very much. Probably every generation in the Church thinks its generation is more evil than preceding generations. It is easy to have a type of nostalgia for “the good ole days” when things were better. But I think that’s a myth. Every generation is an evil generation in one way or another. Ours is not uniquely evil, but commonly evil.

The third thing that strikes me about this passage is the content of evil, which is what I want us to focus on this morning. What constitutes an evil generation? If you heard some preacher use that phrase, what would come to your mind? I think most of us would think of the overt sins in the second table of the law, sins such as violence, sexual immorality, stealing and lying. Such things are indeed evil, but they are not what Jesus had in mind when he called his generation an evil generation. Let’s look, then, at what Jesus believed to constitute an evil generation and the important question that follows from that. That question concerns how we go about making disciples in such a generation.

I. Demands a Sign – v. 38-42

An evil generation demands a sign before embracing Jesus. At first glance, it seems that the request from the scribes and Pharisees was respectful and appropriate. **“Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you”** (v. 38). They call him “Teacher” and only seem to be verifying his credentials in an effort to make sure the people would not be led astray. Jesus doesn’t interpret this request in a positive way and finds in it evidence of the evil and adulterous nature of this generation. It is not difficult to see the reason for Jesus’ negative view. Hadn’t he just performed such signs and miracles among them? A demon-oppressed man had just been healed of his blindness and mute tongue, resulting in the amazement of the people and their conclusion that Jesus must be the Messiah. The Pharisees drew a different conclusion, deciding that Jesus’ power came from Satan.

Jesus disputes the opinion of the Jewish leaders that they just needed more evidence in order to believe. They already had ample evidence, but their hearts did not receive it for the simple reason that they didn’t want to receive it. The answer to their problem was not more evidence, but a change of heart. How about you? Do you think your faith would be bolstered if God performed some miraculous sign? Let’s imagine a miraculous sign that would really be an attention-grabber, a miracle that would be clear and not open to any other interpretation. Suppose we ask God on a specific day to write in the sky around the entire world the words of John 3:16. Before the day arrives, we let the whole world know that this is going to happen and will be evidence that people should put their trust in Jesus. All the Christians around the world unite in prayer for this. Then suppose it happens. If you think your faith would be bolstered by such a miraculous sign, you don’t know your heart very well. It may be that you experience a few days or weeks of heightened spiritual interest in the aftermath of such a miracle. But such signs have no power to change the evil human heart.

The human problem is not lack of evidence about God. We have the evidence of creation, which makes a compelling case for its Creator for any who care to look with an open mind. We have the evidence of God’s providential care for his Church, whose continued existence is a miracle itself. We have the evidence of the Scriptures, which tell of the resurrection of Jesus by the testimony of eyewitnesses. So Jesus tells the scribes and Pharisees that he will give them a sign, one that he calls **“the sign of the prophet Jonah”** (v. 39). He is referring to his death and resurrection.

You remember the story of Jonah. He was commanded by God to go and preach a message of judgment to Israel’s enemies, the Ninevites of Assyria. But he didn’t want to go out of fear that they would repent, so he boarded a ship and headed in the opposite direction. God sent a storm, and Jonah was thrown overboard so the ship could survive. A whale swallowed Jonah and he stayed in the belly of the whale for three days. During those three days, God directed the whale to swim east, back to where God had told Jonah to go. Upon its arrival,

the whale vomited Jonah upon land, and he proceeded to Nineveh where he proclaimed his message.

Jesus is talking about his own death and resurrection. A sign will indeed be given to those demanding one from Jesus, and it will be a powerful sign. Was it enough? When they received reports that Jesus had been raised from the dead, did they all believe in him? Some did, but most did not. The reason is clear—they didn't believe because they didn't want to believe. Theirs was a heart problem, not a problem with lack of evidence. That's why Jesus says that testimony will be given against them on the day of judgment by the men of Nineveh. The Ninevites had far less evidence than those in Jesus' day, yet they repented at the preaching of Jonah. They had no signs at all, just preaching. And the preaching was from an angry prophet, not a loving and merciful Jesus. It was a message only of judgment, while Jesus preaches both judgment and mercy.

Jesus then mentions another example. The Queen of Sheba came from far away to hear the wisdom of Solomon. She too will testify against the Pharisees on the day of judgment, because they have far greater advantages than her. She had the wisdom of Solomon, but Jesus is wisdom itself. He is the one who gave Solomon his wisdom.

Jesus' ultimate point is that he is the best sign ever from God. They are asking for a sign when they are speaking to a sign. Their problem is not the lack of evidence, but the lack of a heart that wants God. That's our problem too. The good news is that Jesus says there's a solution to that problem, and the solution is to repent. We are to repent of having a heart that really doesn't want God in our lives, but then fools the self into thinking that the problem is a lack of evidence. We repent and we ask God to give us a new heart.

II. Wants Jesus' Benefits but not Jesus – v. 43-45

Jesus is still describing the evil and adulterous generation of his day, and does so here in a way that seems curious at first. He speaks of an unclean spirit, a demon, who comes out of a person. We are not told exactly why that demon has come out, but it is clearly a good thing when a demon leaves a person. The implication is that Jesus has had something to do with the demon coming out. But then, Jesus says, the demon is unable to find a suitable home, despite a thorough search made for such. So it decides to check out its former home and finds it empty, clean and orderly. It's a happy finding for this demon, and it goes and finds seven other evil spirits, more evil than the original demon, and all eight demons now take up residence in this person.

Though this passage seems a little odd to modern ears, I don't think it's too difficult to discern Jesus' meaning. He is talking about the advantages

experienced by Israel because of his presence. Demons were being cast out and people's lives were being put back together again. But the house is still empty because Jesus has not been welcomed in. The house has been much improved because of Jesus' influence, but Jesus will not go where he is unwelcome. Not so the demons. They find this house put together again and rush in uninvited to do their destructive work. Houses are intended to be occupied. Neutrality when it comes to Jesus is not possible.

There is an application for this in our day. Many welcome the benefits Jesus brings, but don't want Jesus himself. As a result of the void created by Jesus' absence, things get much worse. I wonder if that's an explanation for what we see in secularized Europe today. That continent has seen many benefits come to it as a result of centuries of Christian influence. But Jesus is, for the most part, not welcome there any longer. Within that void, the demons of false religions are rushing in.

Could the same be happening in suburban America as well? Back in 2006, David Goetz wrote a book titled *Death by Suburb*. He opens the book like this:

My wife and I worship at Latte Temple most Sundays before heading to church, and recently a homeless man asked for a ride to the College Avenue train station as I climbed into my SUV with two coffees worth almost \$9 in hand. I told him to jump in. 'Are you headed to church?' he said. 'Everyone goes to church here. I do too.' I've often thought my 'burb,' located a little over twenty miles west of downtown Chicago [Wheaton], could create a tasty tagline and positioning statement for its public relations brochures: WHERE EVEN THE HOMELESS HAVE A CHURCH HOME.

A few pages later, Goetz says, "I think my suburb, as safe and religiously coated as it is, keeps me from Jesus." But then he adds, "I don't need to escape the suburbs, I need to find Jesus here."

Jesus' point is that our need isn't to have nice, clean lives. Moralism and legalism pave the way for demonic and destructive influence. Parents, your goal isn't to have things run smoothly in the lives of your children. If you manage to raise children who get good grades, learn to work hard and end up with lucrative jobs, but who have no room for Jesus, all you have accomplished, according to Jesus, is to prepare a nice home for demons. Our goal in this evil generation is not to make disciples and raise children to have life run smoothly. It is to make disciples who love Jesus and welcome him fully.

III. Presumptuous – v. 46-50

The last paragraph of the chapter gives one more description of an evil generation, but then ends with great hope for us all. The example of the evil of

that generation is supplied by the family of Jesus. **“His mother and brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him”** (v. 47). The next verses make it clear that Jesus is occupied with teaching his disciples. So it is not without significance that Jesus’ family is said to be standing outside, not inside with his disciples. That is a commentary not just on their physical position but their spiritual condition as well. That is made particularly clear in the other gospel accounts. In Mark’s description of this event, he adds that Jesus’ mother and brothers thought he had lost his mind. John, in a separate incident, says that Jesus’ brothers did not believe in him (John 7:1-5).

Jesus’ response to this request from his brothers and mother clarifies what is going on here. He says that his true family consists of those who do the will of his heavenly Father. His mother and brothers are being presumptuous, thinking they can have a claim on Jesus merely because of a privilege of birth. Jesus makes it clear that it doesn’t work that way. Faith in him creates a new family. He is not saying that we *become* his brothers and sisters by doing the will of God, but we *identify* ourselves as his family by the kind of faith that leads to such obedience.

Like the age in which Jesus’ lived, ours is an evil and adulterous generation. They all have been. As a result of that, following Jesus sometimes disrupts family relationships. But it also creates a new family, a family created by the grace of God. Jesus pointed his hand at these disciples who were doing nothing more than listening to him. It is when we do so that a new family is created. We are the family of those who listen to Jesus, and it is this new family that is Jesus’ special weapon against the evil of every generation.

We live in a scattered age. Many live in places far from their birth families. Others have suffered through broken families. But hear the words of Jesus. He is making us into a new family, even as we sit here today and listen to his words through this sermon. It is a powerful ministry when we do family things like take meals to one another during times of need. Our family has been the beneficiary of kindnesses like that. It gives Jesus great joy when he sees his family acting like a family. A few months ago I visited a church member in the hospital who was facing a significant surgery for cancer. When I arrived, I found several church members already there. And as I was sitting in the waiting room, another church member arrived who said she was going to be there for the duration, no matter how many hours it took. That’s what families do, and Jesus has made us a family.

CONCLUSION:

The Church, created by the grace of Jesus, is the answer to the evil of this and any generation. Let us live in such a way that others see the love of Jesus and come to know the blessing of life in a good family.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 12:38-50

1. Do you think the moral condition of America in 2018 is getting worse, better or about the same as in the past? Why do you say that?
2. Jesus speaks of an “evil and adulterous generation,” and not just evil and adulterous individuals. The statement was made in the sermon that “an evil generation produces evil individuals as diseased soil produces diseased plants.” Can you think of examples of that in our day? That is, how is our evil generation producing evil individuals?
3. Jesus first points to the demand for a sign as evidence of the evil of his generation. The scribes and Pharisees had concluded that their questions about Jesus could be answered with more evidence. Jesus believed that the lack of evidence was not the problem, but the lack of a repentant heart was. He points to the Ninevites under Jonah’s preaching and the Queen of Sheba as those who responded properly even though they had much less evidence than these scribes and Pharisees. If someone came to you asking for more evidence of the truthfulness of Jesus, what would you point them to as evidence they already have?
4. The story of the demon who leaves the man and then returns with seven other demons is a warning against wanting Jesus’ benefits without wanting Jesus. We sometimes want him to make our lives run smoothly, but don’t really want him. How do you see that in your life or in the lives of those you know?
5. As was pointed out earlier, an evil generation produces evil individuals just as bad soil produces bad plants. But the opposite is also the case. A righteous generation produces righteous people. This chapter ends with a positive note about how Jesus’ disciples constitute his true family. The Church is Jesus’ answer to this evil generation. How do you see the Church be a positive influence in your spiritual growth?
6. The Church is also a family. What are some ways you have experienced the Church acting like a family?