

A Faithless Generation

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Preacher: Hilary Roath

[0 : 00] This is the AM service on September the 14th 1997. The sermon is entitled A Faithless Generation. The preacher is Hilary Roth and the sermon is taken from Matthew chapter 17 verses 14 to 27.

We have read in chapter 17 of Matthew the story of the transfiguration in which God declared that Jesus was the Son of God.

Jesus came down from that Mount of Transfiguration with James and with Peter and John. And as we read today, he was met by a man with a great need.

In verse 14 we read, Jesus and the three disciples descend from the glory of the high mountain to the darkness of the valley beneath.

And the contrast couldn't be more striking. In Raphael's painting, The Transfiguration, the one on which he literally worked himself to death, pictures the contrast between what had taken place on the top of the mountain and what was happening in the plain below.

[2 : 04] Raphael has actually united those two scenes, but they must have taken place at some considerable distance from each other and a day apart, according to Luke.

But bringing those two scenes together, Raphael really helps us to understand the Gospels, because he emphasizes exactly what the Gospels also seem to be stressing.

Stressing what a tremendous contrast there was between the glory above, which is the upper half of Raphael's masterpiece, and the shame and the confusion below, which is the lower half.

Above is the light, and below are the shadows. Below, a distraught father has brought his suffering son to the nine disciples, begging them to deliver him.

But they couldn't. The scribes had noticed their failure, and they were using this as an argument. They were probably gloating over the nine, because they'd been unable to heal the boy.

[3 : 29] And while the disciples perhaps were defending themselves, and the scribes were accusing them, the epilepsy was all but killing the boy.

Matthew tells us that the boy was epileptic. He was very ill, falling into the fire and into the water. Mark describes him as not able to speak, and often fell to the ground foaming at the mouth and grinding his teeth.

And after this, the boy would go into a kind of rigor mortis. Luke said that the boy was the only son, and that he would scream as he went into these convulsions.

And while some of these symptoms can have natural causes, this boy, we are told, was at the mercy of an evil spirit. And the disciples had been helpless to do anything.

No wonder the father rushed to Jesus' feet. The father had approached the disciples for help, but they hadn't been able to do it.

[4 : 49] And that's surprising, because they'd cast out evil spirits from people only days before. So why were they unable to do this?

Why had they failed the boy? In Matthew's gospel, there's only one clue given, and that comes from the words of Jesus in verse 17.

We read, You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you?

Bring him here to me. Jesus wasn't just talking to the father. The father had, in fact, shown faith in coming to the disciples for their help.

He'd continue to have faith in the ability of Jesus to heal his son, even when those disciples couldn't heal him. And in another gospel, we hear and read the father's words to Jesus.

[5 : 53] I believe, he said, help my unbelief. And now was Jesus here talking to the disciples.

His words were for everyone. He was attacking the whole prevailing attitude of the generation of his day.

So what did he mean by faithless and perverse generation? Well, that word faithless, or unbelieving in some versions, is from the same root word as in Hebrews.

The word that was used to describe, or to continue to turn away from God, and we find that in Hebrews 3, chapter 12. We are told, take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

And we read again in verse 19. So we see that they were not able to enter because of their unbelief. And we have already seen in Matthew's gospel the hardening of people's hearts to Jesus' ministry.

[7 : 20] In spite of all his teaching, in spite of the miracles that he's performed, we've seen how some towns have missed out on healings because they hardened their hearts against Jesus.

They were turning away from him and from his ministry through their unbelief.

And they were missing out on blessing. But that other word, perverse, is a very strong word.

It's a word used in geology to describe the process in the twisting of the earth. And so Jesus is saying that it's not just turning away, but it is to twist or distort.

And that was certainly happening in the people's attitude towards the ministry of Jesus. In their rejection of him, they were trying to twist his words and his motives, to distort his motives.

[8 : 37] And like the Israelites of old, they failed to hear and to act on his promises. And they missed out.

Missed out on getting their needs met through their unwillingness to believe in him. Could these words of Jesus be addressed to our generation?

Well, I don't believe there can be any doubt about it. Because how many of us really believe that our God is the God of the impossible?

Do we really trust him to work in our lives and in the lives of those that we pray for? You and I live in a perverse generation that twists the word of God.

God. And so you and I need to be very honest with God. Because one of the things that challenges us in this passage is Jesus' reaction to the attitude of the people.

[10 : 00] He says, how much longer must I put up with you? this shows that he felt that they should have had more trust.

They should have been more trusting in the power of God to see that boy healed. Wouldn't it have been said if that father had gone away saying, I took my son to the disciples of Jesus but they couldn't help.

But this father had enough faith in the power of God not to be put off by a seeming failure.

He had stickability or continuing faith for the healing that was to come. He could have given up but he hung on in there.

He hung on in faith that God's power was greater than these human beings could grasp. And that's what prayer for healing is all about.

[11 : 23] we imperfect healing a human being imperfect in our faith pray to the God of all power and ask him to work through us to bring about blessing for those whom we pray.

We know we have no power within ourselves to heal anyone. but what we do know is that God can do great things through prayer and can work through human weakness to bring about blessing.

Can you imagine the relief the father must have felt when Jesus said bring him here to me. the healing was about to take place but the powers of darkness weren't going to let the boy off easily.

And Luke actually gives a more detailed account of what happened and we read the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion.

it must have been very frightening to see but more than that it was a challenge to the authority of Jesus.

[12 : 56] The father had asked Jesus for help. The son was now in the presence of Jesus but instead of being healed his son seemed to be worse.

have you ever been in this situation? I know I have. You actually get round to praying and then the problem gets worse.

It's easy then to let disappointment and despair and disillusionment come in and as a result it works against the healing or the answers to the prayer.

And we have taken our focus we have to take our focus off our problem now. Take our focus off our problem and we have to focus it on the Lord.

We have to focus it on his promises because the more attention that we give to our problem the more control that it has over us. And the more that we look to the Lord and trust in his love and his power the more we become open to his power working in us.

[14 : 24] And the end result in our passage is that the boy was healed. God the father had faith to bring his son for healing.

He had faith to hang on in there in hope even when the disciples had failed. And in spite of the worsening situation his prayer had been answered and his son was healed.

And all there were astonished at the greatness of the power of God. And today as you bring your own needs or the needs of another to the Lord in prayer you need to take your eyes from the greatness of the problem.

the problem that has been so much on your mind perhaps for so long. And instead turn your eyes on Jesus and think of the greatness of who he is and the greatness of his power and what he can do.

and do that even when things don't appear to be getting any better. In verse 19 we read the disciples came as a group to Jesus to ask him why they couldn't drive out that demon and Jesus told them because of your little faith because of your little faith and Matthew actually gives four other incidents where Jesus used that same expression little faith and we find that in chapter 6 verse 30 where Jesus is saying do not worry about your life consider the lilies of the field if God so clothes the grass of the field which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven will he not much more clothe you of little faith and in chapter 8 verse 26

[17 : 01] Jesus stills the storm and then says to his disciples why are you afraid you of little faith and in chapter 14 verse 31 Jesus walks on the water and Peter gets out of the boat and he starts to walk towards Jesus and then notices the strong wind and becomes frightened and begins to sink and Jesus reaches out his hand and caught him saying you of little faith why did you doubt and in verse 60 in chapter 16 verse 8 Jesus said when the disciples had forgotten the bread you of little faith do you not remember the five loaves and the five thousand and the seven loaves and the four thousand there's something common in common in all of these stories because all of these cases there were strong good understandable legitimate human reasons why they should have been anxious but not in

Jesus sight in every case he rebuked them for their little faith in Jesus opinion if they had really trusted him they need not have been anxious and then Jesus went on to say that a tiny fragment of faith can see great things happen but truly I tell you if you have faith the size of a mustard seed you will say to this mountain move from here to there and it will move and nothing will be impossible for you what Jesus is saying is that a tiny amount of faith can produce great results it is not great faith in

God that is important it's a mustard seed size faith in a great God that brings the results it is not great faith in God but faith in a great God that brings results asking God to increase our faith might be good it's a good prayer to pray but rather we pray that God may increase our appreciation of him appreciation of his greatness of his love his power and his mercy because the more we recognize how great and loving and powerful he is the more we will love him the more we will trust him to work in our situations and the situations and the lives of those for whom we pray and nothing will be impossible for you this is an incredible promise from the lips of

Jesus and to whom was it said to those who were winning great victories to those who had the world at their feet winning victory after victory no it was said to those disciples who had been abject failures someone had just come to them for the sort of help that they had experience in giving and they had failed dismally so what did they need to become or to do so that nothing would be impossible for them well they had faith but they needed to develop that faith to the size of a tiny grain of mustard seed and they had to put their faith into practice they had to speak it out if they were confronted by a mountain like the evil spirit that they couldn't cast out they were to speak to the mountain and to tell it to move and it would move but all too easily we focus on the difficulties that we face and they appear to be large mountains to us that are impossible to move our mountains may be things like illness especially cancer or perhaps not enough money perhaps some injustice that has been done perhaps a sense of hopelessness or powerlessness yet

God has consistently throughout history moved great mountains for his people nothing will be impossible for you Jesus tells us and we read in verse 22 Jesus mentioning his death and his resurrection for the second time we told that the disciples were deeply distressed and in Mark we are told that they were afraid to ask him about it and in verse 24 we read about Jesus and the temple tax Jesus and his disciples had been away from Capernaum a tax collecting centre for a long time so the temple tax had not been paid doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax was a question put to

[24 : 04] Peter and Peter says yes he does and when Peter is at the point of telling Jesus what had happened Jesus speaks first and shows that he already knows he also knows where the tax money for both himself and Peter will be got will be had not at the bank but from the mouth of the very first fish which Peter was going to catch this story this miracle is told by Matthew and Matthew alone it has nothing to do with the taxes paid to Rome it is redemption money the ransom for his soul which every Israelite 20 years or over was by God ordered to pay and which was used in the maintenance of the sanctuary this double drachma tax was the amount generally earned for two days work and now it was this double drachma or half shekel which neither

Jesus nor Peter had yet paid this miracle as I said is recorded by Matthew and as we know Matthew is a former tax collector and Matthew wrote this gospel and it is recognized as the gospel of the king and this miracle shows Jesus kingship the kings of the earth do not take tax from their own sons Jesus points out to Peter that he is free from this tax because he is the son of the king the son of God and as the son of God he was too poor to pay even a half shekel and his disciples were too poor as he was so he exercised his kingship over nature to provide what was needed this is the only miracle

Jesus performed to meet his own needs if you remember Satan tempted Jesus to use his divine powers in Matthew chapter 4 but he had refused here he still did not use his power selfishly because other people were involved so we do not give offence because others to others he says this was Jesus' explanation for the miracle he did not want people to be offended because he being a Jew did not support the temple ministry Jesus did not have to pay the tax but for practical reasons he paid it and he also included Peter so their reputation would not be hurt and this is the only miracle using money Matthew had been a tax collector so we could expect him to be really interested in this miracle and this tax comes from the days of Moses and we read about it in Exodus 30 and 38 and this is the only miracle using one fish Jesus had multiplied the fish for Peter in Luke 5 and he repeated that miracle in John 21 but here he uses only one fish fish and when you think about how complex this miracle is it's really amazing first someone has to lose a coin in the water then a fish has to take that coin in its mouth and to keep it there that same fish then has to bite Peter's hook with a coin in its mouth and then to be caught you could never explain that in any natural way and this miracle was performed for Peter how the other disciples pay their taxes we not told this is one of the many many miracles which

Jesus performed for Peter he healed his mother in law he helped Peter catch fish he enabled him to walk on the water healed malchus' ear and delivered Peter from prison no wonder Peter wrote in his letter casting all your care upon him for he cares for you and this is the only miracle that which doesn't have the results recorded we would expect another verse but verse 28 is not there so how do we know that that miracle took place because Jesus said it would but truly I tell you if you have faith the size of a mustard seed you will say to this mountain move from here to there and it will move nothing will be impossible for you you and

[29 : 57] I can list dozens of things that are impossible but today let Jesus have the last word he wants to encourage us in our faith us with even tiny mustard seed size faith but Jesus says nothing is impossible for you with great faith with faith in a great God nothing will be impossible for you Amen to letang um faith in a great■■■■i Lord second