

Describing this Generation
Leann Williams, September 6, 2026

This morning I'm bringing a message again revolving around one of the prayers of Jesus. I'd like to describe the context from two different vantage points. The first is the historic Big Picture. This is a story about Jesus' adult life that occurs about halfway through his earthly ministry. Jesus has done miracles and taught crowds including The Sermon on the Mount in the area around the Sea of Galilee. He has gathered his 12 disciples and instructed them in ministry. And a sort of second generation or wave of disciples have gathered, and Jesus has sent the 72 out to minister in the Galilean region. That's the Big Picture.

There's a secondary story at work here as well. Matthew is telling the story around 90 A.D. which is roughly 60 years after the events. His audience is Jewish followers of Jesus. They are caught in a huge transitional time. Are they primarily Jews who accept Jesus as the Messiah? Or are they primarily Christians which are increasingly Gentile or not followers of Jewish law? It seems Matthew's audience finds themselves between a rock and a hard place. If they continue to be kosher Jews, they get criticism from the Christian community. If they reject the kosher laws and integrate within Christianity, they lose the respect and relationships they have within their Jewish communities. So, as Matthew tells this story about Jesus' ministry there's the historic application to Jesus disciples during his lifetime and there's the application of the same story to Matthew's contemporaries in their transitional period of developing Christianity.

As I read this narrative, I also connect with the lessons from this story in our own times. In the story Jesus describes people's responses to his ministry in his time, Matthew tells the story in a way that will relate directly to his audience, and I see clear parallels to the times in which we live particularly as we are in an election year. I am choosing to focus on the passage in Matthew 11. The events are also described in Luke 10 with a few different details.

The passage we are considering begins in Matthew 11:16 in which Jesus asks, "To what can I compare this generation?" He answers, "They are like children sitting in

the marketplaces and calling out to others: We played the pipe for you and you did not dance; We sang a dirge and you did not mourn.”

The Living Bible version gives a little more contemporary translation. It states, “What shall I say about this nation? These people are like children playing who say to their little friends, ‘We played wedding but you weren't happy, so we played funeral but you weren't sad.’”

The Message version offers, “How can I account for this generation? The people have been like spoiled children whining to their parents, ‘We wanted to skip rope and you were always tired; We wanted to talk, but you were always too busy!’”

Has anyone here ever encountered a child who cannot be satisfied? A child so focused on what they want that they can't be satisfied with what they already have? A child who insists on their own way? I can be that child. Maybe there have been times when you can relate to that child as well.

In the next two verses, Jesus goes on to give more specific examples of his generation. From the NIV version, he reports, “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.”

I appreciate the J.B. Phillips paraphrase that is worded, “For John came in the strictest austerity and people say, ‘He’s crazy!’ Then the Son of Man came, enjoying life, and people say, ‘Look, a drunkard and a glutton -the bosom-friend of the tax collector and the sinner.’ Ah, well, Wisdom stands or falls by her own actions.”

In Jesus generation, the religious community seemed to be split over the validity of strict spiritual disciplines, following the law, or a gracious, welcoming generosity. For Matthew's audience, the struggle to sort out the values of the Jewish community for those choosing to follow Jesus and find a way forward was life alteringly difficult. In my life, I have experienced these tensions as well.

I have been part of Christian faith communities most of my life. Early on my family was part of a big church split in a Swedish Covenant church over a new “liberal” pastor. The next church we attended was an Independent Fundamental Churches of America meeting in Berkeley, CA. They voted to kick out John MacArthur, a very

conservative theologian, from their non-denominational denomination as a “liberal”. It is interesting that at that time in the 1960s for that group of people, “liberal” was synonymous with, “Evangelical”.

Times have changed. But- have they? I think I have observed that the issues change, but the underlying attitudes have not. We like to be right (whatever that is). We want what we want. We are generally more comfortable with certainty than ambiguity. And sometimes we act like demanding children.

Sierra Cascades Yearly Meeting of Friends, the Quaker entity that holds my recording as a public minister, came out of a very painful split. You would think we could learn from that experience and find ways to move forward in grace, patience, and generosity. In recent years, as we've labored to find words that reflect our identity, we have found a broad spectrum of both theological and sociological understandings. Yet, as we have worked to find an identity statement that satisfies all participants, the words have been hard to find. Our Christ-centered folks want specific words used. Those words feel too constraining for others. The language we use to describe our inclusivity feels strident to some and inadequate for others. This is where I find the last phrase of the scripture we are considering helpful. “But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.”

Other versions of this statement read:

Wisdom is justified by her works. The proof of wisdom is in the actions it produces. Wisdom is shown to be right by what it does. Wisdom will be vindicated by her actions – not by your opinions. A wise man is proved to be wise by what he has done.

So, I hear Jesus pointing out that his generation has fundamentally different understandings of what righteousness or wise living looks like. The direction he moves us toward is to look at the outcomes, the fruit of each perspective, to find the path of wisdom.

James chapter three gives us a description of wisdom from a biblical perspective. I will read verses 13-18 from The Message version:

Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here is what you do. Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't

wisdom. Twisting the truth to make to yourself sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom - It's animal cunning, devilish plotting. Whenever you're just trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the other's throats.

Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.

James just described the fruit of wisdom. Other passages illustrate how the word “fruit” was used to describe actions. Matthew 3:8 records John the Baptist telling the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jewish religious leaders of their day, to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” The New Life version translates it, “Do something to show me that your hearts have changed.”

In Matthew 7 Jesus speaks of true and false prophets and says it’s by their fruit you will recognize true prophets. The New Living Translation says, “Just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions.”

In Matthew 21 Jesus is sharing parables about the Kingdom of God. Jesus said to his listeners, “Have you never read the scriptures ‘the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone’...Therefore I tell you the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit...When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus parables, they knew he was talking about them.”

Galatians 5 specifically names the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and faithfulness. Other translations include the words charity, joy, peace, tolerance, gentleness, goodness, and faithfulness. The Message version lists “affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity, willingness to stick with things and people, a sense of compassion in the heart, a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people.”

Ephesians 5:9 in the English Standard version states, “The fruit of the Light is in all that is good, right, and true.

In Matthew 11 we have heard Jesus describe the generation he found himself living in as quarrelsome children. The religious community was at odds with both John the Baptist and Jesus himself. There was a real disagreement about the best way to live. Jesus says that real wisdom will show up in actions. Other New Testament writers teach that true wisdom shows up as grace, kindness, gentleness, reasonableness, compassion, and patience.

After the statement about wisdom is shown in actions, Jesus pronounces judgement on cities that had the opportunity to witness miracles and chose not to trust what they saw. Then in verse 25-26 he prays, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.”

In Matthew 18:3 Jesus adds to this thought saying, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

In the context of Matthew 11, Jesus is describing people arguing about the correct way to live a spiritual life. Neither John the Baptist nor Jesus met with approval by the highly religious. In this context Jesus says God has hidden spiritual truths from the wise and learned. Those words have also been translated as the wise and prudent, understanding, intelligent, or the clever and learned, or sophisticated and educated. These are all descriptions of people who are pretty sure they know something or even have a corner on the truth, people who have a high degree of certainty. Children, on the other hand, particularly young ones, have a high degree of curiosity, a willingness to learn. Young children understand they are little in a world of bigness. They are easily overwhelmed and seek comfort from those they are most connected to. I think that’s what Jesus is talking about. The true path of wisdom shown in our actions is revealed to people who remain curious, are willing to learn, understand their place in the world, and understand our human need for connection.

So, as we participate in another election season, I am hoping to keep this at the forefront of my mind when interacting with others. I want to stay curious. I want to be willing to learn why people hold the opinions they do. I want to honor connection

and realize people's need to belong. It is this kind of behavior, and being gentle, reasonable, overflowing with mercy, having a willingness to stick with things and people, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people that will prove if I have any wisdom or not.

I'd like to pray for us all in closing.

Creator God,

Through all the generations of humanity you have seen our weakness and selfishness, our tendency to think we have the truth and judge others that disagree. In this election cycle, I am praying that the people of this faith community and all others find ways to demonstrate wisdom. Give us hearts that are open, ears that are ready to listen, and give us good questions. When given the opportunity to share our thoughts, let our words be characterized by grace, gentleness and compassion. Above all, let us hold on to our Quaker testimony that there is that of God in every person. Let wisdom guide us and our actions live out wisdom as Light in this dark world.