

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: O Unbelieving & Perverse Generation!  
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What a great sermon title: "O Unbelieving & Perverse Generation!" It's just such an attention-grabber, but I couldn't resist it. It's a verse from the Bible that we stumbled across in Bible Study this week, and it's such a surprise coming from Jesus. We like to think of Jesus as calm, cool, and collected—"Blessed are the meek," "Turn the other cheek," that kind of Jesus.

There's even a hymn, "Jesus, Friend, So Kind and Gentle." That's the Jesus we like. Instead, he's knocking an entire generation, and it doesn't even fit into the story! Here's what happened. A dad came to Jesus with a sick child. Nowadays, from the description of the story, we know the kid had epilepsy, seizures, convulsions way beyond the dad's control.

In ancient times, people thought things they couldn't understand or control were demon possessions. People thought a demon literally entered the body of that boy, took hold of him, made him thrash about, a danger to himself and others. So the dad takes the boy to Jesus, asks for help, and then mentions that the Disciples couldn't do anything for the boy. And Jesus erupts! "O unbelieving and perverse generation, how long must I put up with you?" (Luke 9:41)

Whoa! Where did *that* come from? Seriously, the dad had done nothing wrong; the kid certainly wasn't at fault; and Jesus tells the Disciples that some things can't just be "fixed," they need a more spiritual approach, and he lets them off the hook. So they're not at fault. So why the big rant?

Well, life has its moments, right? Today is Father's Day. And with our graduates, it's also "getting out of the house," "going off to college," "you're on your own" day. Whether it's freshman year or a gap year, life is changing. And getting to this point for fathers, mothers, graduates, even siblings, has been a journey, hasn't it? Some things went well, right? Some things were a bit rocky; some of life was smooth, some of it wasn't so cool. That's life, whether you're a teenager or parents or grandparents

Being a parent or a child, some things are guaranteed. There will be issues. Health issues: or at least a broken bone or two. Sports issues: triumphs and losses. Relationship issues, friend issues: jealousy, cliques, dating, betrayal. School issues: good grades, tough exams, a not-so-happy teacher. Home issues: getting grounded, lobbying for more freedom, growing up. Life issues: stress, tension, social media. Ugh. So the reality of being a graduate and the reality of being a dad or a parent . . . along the way they are, almost by nature, in conflict.

My father is 96—a great man, a great pastor, and a great dad. When I was 12, growing up in New York City, he made the decision to send me away to boarding school because, as he said repeatedly, “If you don’t go away, either the streets will kill you, or I will kill you!” Maybe that’s where I first heard that sermon title, that Bible verse. Probably after one more gang rumble or an F in math or detention or just being rebellious, he probably looked at me and said, “O perverse generation . . . how long must I put up with you?”

But seriously, where did this frustration come from? Whether it’s parent/child, father/son, society/youth, or God/humanity, where’s the frustration? Mostly, frustration is well intentioned. We want the best from the person we’re frustrated with.

I was thinking about all the kids I have had in youth groups over my career, and the kid I rode the hardest was a girl getting 55s and 60s in school. And I knew full well she was capable of a 70 or even a 75; maybe not an 80, but by golly, she should have gotten a good solid C, and I made it my job to make her life miserable until she did. The issue isn’t whether you are an A-student or an All-Star or a first-chair violinist; it’s whether you are getting the most out of yourself.

All of us, every single one of us, we have three levels: what we’re capable of, what we settle for, what’s beneath us. It’s true on the golf course, it’s true in school, it’s true at work, it’s true in marriage, it’s true in Christlikeness: what we are capable of, what we settle for, what’s beneath us. And let’s face it, it’s the job of “authority figures” to push us to what we are capable of, not to let us settle for something less.

Now, there is a word we don’t like: *authority*, especially “authority figures.” Bosses. Drill sergeants. Coaches. The cop who pulled you over. The teacher who has your number. Parents, when they say “NO.” God. They are there to get the most out of us, the best we are capable of. And when we resist, when we fall short, well, that’s when frustration boils over, and you get a nice guy like Jesus blurting out, “O perverse generation, how long must I put up with you?”

Jesus was expressing frustration with his Disciples. He had spent three years with them, day and night, trying to prep them to stand on their own two feet, to take charge, to start the Church, to spread Christianity, to build the Kingdom of God, and they weren't getting it. In fact, each day they seemed more dense than the day before. They were petty, argumentative, mouthy, and oblivious.

Just after this story about the boy with epilepsy, Jesus wanted to visit a certain village, but the village wouldn't welcome them, so here's what two of the Disciples said: "Let's have God kill them all." (Luke 9:54) Those two idiots had been side by side with Jesus from the beginning!

You and I, we're stuck reading a Bible written 2,000 years ago. But those Disciples actually heard Jesus say, with their own ears, straight from Jesus's mouth, things like "Blessed are the peacemakers," "love your enemies," "forgive a lot," "turn the other cheek," "do unto others." He said that to them, in person, face to face, out loud. And their practical application of Jesus's teachings was, "Let's have God kill them all."

Here's a rule of thumb for anyone who wants to speak for God or to God. . . . They should try to be in tune with God. Asking God to support ungodly things is pretty darn close to blasphemy, speaking about God falsely. Whether it's Christians' twisting Scripture now or the Disciples' missing the point of Scripture entirely, God gets exasperated. "O perverse generation, how long must I put up with you?" Which loosely translated means, "I expected much better from you." People who love us, people who really, really want the best for us, hold us to a higher standard.

I went to the movies the other day. I'm not a superhero or "Star Wars" fan, but I do like dark, depressing, talkative, idea movies set in a Church. So I sat alone in an empty theater, watching "First Reformed," The new Ethan Hawke movie about a broken, discouraged pastor serving a historic, dying Church in upstate New York. I've made you want to run out and see it, haven't I?

About two-thirds of the way through the movie, I was thinking we have to send out an email and tell you all to see it! After all, we are an old historic Church, our 300th anniversary is coming up, and the struggle to be historic and relevant could be useful. Then the movie took a couple of dark, twisted turns that I didn't see coming, left me puzzled and wondering whether to recommend it or not.

Now, in marketing what I've just done is called "product placement." You place a product in your movie or book or TV show. They pay you for it. So I've put out the "First Reformed" product in my sermon, but I don't think they're going to pay me. Because in telling you about the movie, I used words like *dark*,

*twisted, depressing, broken, dying, discouraged*, and the worst marketing word of all: *Church*.

Nevertheless, I kind of wish a lot of you would see it. One of the sub-themes of the movie is the contrast between the historic, dwindling "First Reformed Church," which is known in town as "The Museum," and the big megachurch across town, high-tech, with peppy music, a modern building. They are a happy sappy Church called "Abundant Life," and they are all about abundance, not upsetting any apple carts. That old historic Church, with the discouraged pastor, they're still trying to toe the mark, to challenge people in society to be the best they can be. But generally speaking, people don't like to be pushed, challenged, held to a high standard, not by somebody else, not by an "authority figure." And yet, the fact is, we need people along the way who will nudge, who have the right and the authority to nudge.

The Book of Proverbs in the Bible is actually a teaching manual for growing up, for taking responsibility, for heading out into the world, for achieving at the level you're capable of. One of the more famous Proverbs says, "Train up a child the way they should go, and later on they won't stray from it." (Proverbs 22:6) "*Train up a child.*" All along life's way, God places people to train us, just right. To put us on the right path. To challenge us, direct us, correct us, show us, mentor us. They are there to help.

On Mother's Day, we always talk about "mothering," a way of being, an approach to life that isn't confined to mothers or women. I think the same on Father's Day. There is a "fathering" that happens in our lives, that comes from all sorts of people, beyond biology, beyond gender. We've all been mothered. We've all been fathered, and the good ones do it right.

There is another interesting verse in the Bible that almost mirrors the Proverb, with just a subtle twist. St. Paul wrote, "Fathers, do not exasperate your children. But train them up in the instruction of the Lord." (Ephesians 6:4) So both verses tell us to train up the next generation, but there is a way to do it and a way not to do it. You can produce results or produce resentment. "Don't exasperate your children."

Let's be honest: Jesus was exasperated. Hey, it happens. Frustration, exasperation, disappointment—that stuff creeps into family dynamics. Like my father telling me, "Either the streets will kill you, or I will, so off to boarding school with you."

Now, I don't know if what my father said was 1950s parenting or a preacher's over-the-top hyperbole to make a point. But here's a fact: my father's crude statement, his "West Side Story" version of "O perverse generation, how long

do I have to put up with you?" My dad's exasperation got me dropped off at a most amazing world at a most amazing time: the Northfield Mount Hermon School for Boys in the 1960s with the best teachers ever, where every student played a sport, went to Church, and worked a job. I mean, *really* worked.

A classmate asked me this week about those work details, and I commented on Facebook, "Four years, four worst jobs, four hard bosses. Loved every minute." That's what happens when you're getting trained up. You grunt while you're being trained up. You thank God later.

Which brings us back to Father's Day. All holidays are days of memory, days of emotion, if we choose to remember. D-Day. Veterans Day. Memorial Day. Mother's Day. Good Friday. Easter. Birthdays. And, yes, Father's Day. All those days have meaning when you pause, just pause a little while you think on and thank on those "fathering" people in your life.

For me? There's my grandfather, who gave me my uncle's catcher's equipment when I was 6 years old, dramatically shaping the next 15 years of my life; an English teacher at Mount Hermon School for Boys, who verbally abused me relentlessly until reading and writing took over my life to this very minute; my father, whose 70-year life as a pastor taught me more than all the writings of St. Paul about being a Christian, a pastor, and a citizen; and my sons, who walk through life with the grace and peace I wish I had but don't, so I'm glad that their "perverse generation" that exasperates so much is coming along at just the right time! So, that's my Father's Day list. Enjoy making your own!

Our final hymn today is "I Love Your Church, O God," No. 274. Let's stand and sing together.

*I love your Church, O, God,  
On earth your blest abode  
the people our Redeemer saved  
with his own precious blood.*

*I love your Church, O God.  
Whose walls before you stand,  
dear as the apple of your eye,  
and graven on your hand.*

*In love my tears shall fall;  
in love my prayers ascend;  
to serve your Church my toils be given,  
till toils and cares shall end.*

*Beyond my highest joys  
I prize your people's ways:  
the sweet communion, solemn vows,  
the hymns of love and praise.*

*Sure as your truth shall last,  
to Zion shall be given  
the brightest glories earth can yield,  
and brighter bliss of heaven.*