

Gun Control or Heart Change... Which Is Really Needed?

The Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting occurred on December 14, 2012, in Sandy Hook/Newtown, Connecticut, when 20-year-old Adam Lanza fatally shot twenty children and six adult staff members. I live three minutes away from Sandy Hook Elementary, as I serve as one of two pastors at Newtown Bible Church.

Though this tragedy is among the deadliest mass shootings in the United States, it is surely not the last, as recent history illustrates. Therefore, we need to think clearly and biblically about such events so that when they happen, God's people can give a reasoned response, noting especially our hope in and message of Jesus Christ (1 Pet 3:15). People have analyzed the issue of the Sandy Hook tragedy from a multitude of aspects—socially, psychologically, etc. We cannot consider these murders merely an act of *physical* violence as there are far deeper spiritual issues at work. Man consists of body *and* soul—physical and spiritual. We were created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27) and were made living souls (Gen 2:7).

In the beginning there was no death in the Garden of Eden. Death was introduced to mankind as a result of sin and disobedience against God's command (Gen 2:15-17).

The Apostle James diagnoses the root cause for all strife, arguments, and wars: one person does not get what he wants, so he is willing to do anything to get it, even if that means committing murder (Jas 4:1-2). When man commits murder, he fulfills the desires of his father Satan, who has consistently acted murderously from the beginning (Jn 8:44).

That was the issue in the first murder recorded in the Bible. Recall the story. Cain was angry with his brother Abel (Gen 4:5); God confronted him on his anger (Gen 4:6); and rather than deal with his heart of anger, Cain murdered Abel (Gen 4:8). He didn't have access to a gun (that implement wouldn't be created until many years later), but Cain's selfish, sinful heart compelled him to rise up against his brother. You can take man's gun, but if he is intent on killing, he will use a knife or his bare hands. Many mental health professionals want to approach the issue through the lens of mental illness, positing that Lanza was "ill" or "mentally unstable" (*The News-Times*, Jan 29, 2015). Still, anti-gunners think that the only sane response is to put in place more stringent gun laws. Yet Jesus emphasizes that it is not a matter of changing the environment for seeming victims of social awkwardness nor behavior modification, but that we need to understand the defiling element of our sinful hearts (Mk 7:14-23). Regardless of how poorly our parents or peers treat us or what horrible events may befall us in a fallen world, we are not victims but are personally culpable. The wretchedness is within, not without.

It is the wicked heart of man that must be dealt with. The prophet Jeremiah tells us the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked (Jer 17:9). That includes you and me. There are none who are righteous, and no one naturally seeks after God (Romans 3:10-11). We are not *inherently good*. In fact, we are all born as *sinner*s who break God's law and rebel against Him. Therefore, our hearts must be changed by Jesus, Who gives us a new nature and a desire to love Him and others (Matt 22:37-39). Furthermore, the Gospel empowers a Christian to love not only the "nice" guy down the street but also those who are His enemy (Matthew 5:43-47). Man, who loves his sin, must

hate his sin and turn from his wicked way in repentance and place his faith in Christ, Who atoned for sin on the cross (Isaiah 55:7).

Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that murder begins in the heart (Matt 5:21-26). Murder finds root in hateful thoughts toward others. Jesus Christ teaches in this passage that people are guilty of breaking God's law not only when they commit the external act of murder but also even when they harbor anger in their hearts. The ability to commit the act of murder resides within the human heart, were it not for God's grace giving us a greater desire to please Him than ourselves. It doesn't matter how *moral* a person appears outwardly. If man isn't changed from within by God, there is no limit to man's displays of wickedness.

Many people have responded to the Sandy Hook tragedy with loud cries for gun reform. Gun laws and external restraints placed upon man will not curb shootings and other similar violence. Behavior modification will always fall short. Unless man's heart is changed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and given a greater love for God, others, and what is right, we will not see the kind of change in society that brings peace.

Sin is the issue and that's why problems exist, including tragic shootings. We need to stop offering bandages and substitutes and addressing peripheral issues. Instead we need to preach Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor 2:2). This, of course, is foolishness to those who are perishing (1 Cor 1:18). But it's the only message that offers hope for sins forgiven, the peace of God to pervade our hearts in the tragedies and difficulties in life, and peace with God in His presence for all eternity. Any other message would put us in line with the false shepherds of Israel who healed the people superficially saying, "Peace, peace, when there is no peace" (Jer 6:14).

God has not been silent but has written the Bible with all the answers to life, giving a biblical anthropology (study of man) and a biblical soteriology (how sinful man can be rightly related to a holy God).

We have one message: the Gospel, good news. If you are outside Christ, having never turned from your sin and embraced Him in faith, ask God to give you a new heart, one that loves, obeys, and trusts Him alone. Follow Him alone, relying on the perfect life He lived under the Father's Law that you could not live and dying the death we so rightly deserved. Though we don't know all of God's purpose in pain, we do know that one gracious provision in tragedy for us to learn is the opportunity to repent before perishing, like in biblical accounts of tragedy (Lk 13:1-5).

If you are a Christian, then preach the Gospel to yourself everyday. Relish the imputed righteousness of Christ, even considering how to turn each conversation with people to Gospel matters. As you consider tragedy and death in a fallen world, recognize the constant need to die to self, sin, and your own desires. Rather than focusing on guns, unsheath the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, that you might stand against the wiles of the devil and open your mouth boldly for the cause of Christ as a faithful ambassador (Eph 6:11-20).

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