

## A Response to the Tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut

Dear Friends,

Whenever a tragedy like this strikes there are several questions that I always ask myself.

The first question I ask is, “what is the real impact of this tragedy on myself and the community around me”? That question is important, because we don’t want to make someone else’s tragedy our tragedy, and as a result, lose focus on the people who are really hurting. Sometimes what we think is empathy is really only self-focus.

In situations like this, it’s often helpful to remember that the vast majority of us did not lose any children to this particular tragedy. That’s not to say that some other thing in our life doesn’t help us relate to the suffering in a particular way, or that their suffering doesn’t recall some very real memory of suffering in our past. It is simply a reminder that we ought not create undue fear in our homes or in our children by treating every news story like it’s talking about us, or our town. It’s not. For today, most of us are safe. It is they, in Newtown, who are suffering. So while we suffer with them in spirit, let’s not exacerbate the situation by pretending that we, too, have suffered loss, and thereby minimize the true pain that the folks in Newtown, Connecticut, might actually be feeling.

The second question I ask, though, and the one that is far more pertinent to our situation today is this, “how should a Christian think about tragedies like the ones we just witnessed”? What we see is that people are asking questions, and many of us wonder whether or not we can provide any answers.

The plain facts is that what we witnessed on Friday through the lenses of television and other media is that a man entered into a school full of children and did the unthinkable: he began to take lives. The reality of this should shake us awake; it is informing us that something has gone terribly wrong.

But what? What is it that has gone wrong? That is the question.

The immediate response will be the standard ones: the problem is access to guns! The problem is violent video games! The problem is that he had a mental health disorder! And in each case, there is a kernel of truth. In each case, there is something that needs to be addressed. But all of them are far too simplistic a response to the “what has gone wrong” question that actually runs much, much deeper.

The question should really be, “what drives a person to commit such atrocities?” There are plenty of people with guns who would never do this. There are plenty of people who play violent video games and never lash out. There are plenty of perfectly sane people who go out and commit murder, so it is premature to blame it on his mental state.

And while we’re asking questions, perhaps a deeper one still is this: *what makes you think it’s an atrocity, at all?*

The truth of the matter is that there are only two places where we can turn to attempt to formulate a theory as to why what we witnessed is *wrong*. On the one hand, we can turn to

humanity, as many have done. The reason this is wrong is because it does damage to society, or because we all agreed it was wrong, or whatever.

The problem with that worldview, though, is that if, as it professes, men are able to determine whatever it is that is right and wrong, then each of us has just as much of a right as another to determine what is right and wrong for ourselves. If it feels right, do it. Whatever is right and true for you is okay. And whatever is right and true for me is okay.

Ultimately, however, we are left with a problem. If this is how we view the world, then we have no ground to say that a man walking into a school and taking the lives of children is wrong, because we have no universal right and wrong to weigh it against. In the final analysis, if we are honest, we cannot actually say that what the shooter did was wrong; at best, we can say we don't like it, and therefore, as a society, we won't allow it.

But you and I know, as rationale people, that what I have just described does not do justice to the level of evil that we have witnessed. To say it is wrong simply because we don't like it does not ring true to our heart. And the reason it does not ring true is because in our spirit we know that something far greater has been ignored; something far greater has been wronged in this moment. It's greater than whether or not I or you or society dislikes it, or even *thinks* that it is wrong. It is objectively, in reality, evil.

So if we are going to be true to our spirit then we must turn elsewhere for answers, and the other place to turn is to recognize that there is a higher authority—a God—who sets the standard for how we should live, and how we should treat one another, and how we should conduct our business. And when we breach that standard, literally, all evil breaks loose.

The story that the Bible tells begins with a world that is perfectly in line with this standard, and barely gets beyond a brief description of what life was like in that glory before the first breach occurs. The breach of God's standard sent the world spiraling into disaster and chaos. Instead of experiencing life in perfection, we would experience life with evil breaking loose, but for the grace of God restraining it. Instead of being united to a creator God who creates and sustains life, we are separated from him, and we experience death in all its forms.

That experience of death is what drives us not just to *misuse* guns, but to *create* guns in the first place. It is the experience of death that drives us to fantasize about it through video games; of what it might be like to kill another human being without restraint. And it's that experience of death that ultimately turns some people's minds in on themselves: if this life that ends in death is all that there is, then why should I even go on?

We learn through these experiences of death that no matter how much we try to collectively better ourselves as a society, we appear to be going in the opposite direction. No matter how much we think we've advanced, even the advancements themselves seem to introduce a new form of destruction and death into our lives. And every now and again, it's as if a veil has been removed and the dark underbelly of the human race is revealed: it is far more dark than we ever dared imagine.

Furthermore, in moments like this, we recognize that the best we can do is to regulate the symptoms of this deep, dark problem. We can legislate who can access guns, and the types of guns that they can acquire. We can regulate the violence that is found in video games, or

restrict who can purchase them and hopefully in doing so, restrict who can play them. We can provide counseling for those who seem headed down a path that will end in destruction. And all of these are worthwhile and necessary when things have gone so wrong. But what they will not and cannot do is fix the deeper problem. Eventually, the veil will be pulled back again, the darkness will be unleashed, and we'll realize that for all our advancements, we haven't made any progress.

Thankfully the Christian has not just been given the ability to diagnose the problem, we have also been given the remedy. If the problem is that God's standard has been breached, then the solution is that the standard must be repaired. As we have already seen, though, the only thing we show ourselves to be capable of is *breaching* the standard; it will require some thing, or some one, else to do the repair. And like an expert creator, and the one familiar with the standard, God himself comes to repair the breach that we created. This is the message of the "good news", or what we call the Gospel.

The good news of the Bible is that God himself took on the form of humanity in the person of Jesus Christ, and lived a life that perfectly met the standard that he set, and we breach, with alarming regularity. Since he could hold the weight of the standard, and since he had fulfilled it in his life to it's fullest, he could also bear the weight of those who had breached the standard and bear the full weight of the punishment they deserved. This is what took place on the cross. At the pinnacle of history, the truly and only innocent one to ever have lived bears the punishment and destruction of evil unleashed. And then, once he bears it, he defeats it.

This is the great exchange that takes place when we put our trust in Jesus for our salvation, instead of our own measures or our own merit. Jesus is treated as if he created the breach, we are treated as if we upheld the standard. The motive for this exchange is grace; it is lavish love poured out on the undeserving. The acceptance of this exchange is called faith.

When we understand and accept the exchange that happens because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we are given a new lease on life. Our perspective has changed. Rather than looking to ourselves to solve the problem (a proposed solution we know will not work), we look to the love of God to solve the problem. Rather than live as standard *breachers*, we can live as standard *bearers*: ones who reflect the love and goodness of God because of Jesus Christ. Rather than fear, we live in absolute gratitude for what God has done on our behalf.

The offense of the gospel message is this: that you and I share far more in common with a lunatic than we do with the perfect standard-bearer, Jesus Christ. Yet what laws could never do, and trying harder could never accomplish, love achieves. We no longer live as people walking in darkness, but people living in light.

There are many people who have heard this message of love and have still gone on to commit unspeakable acts. The fact is that not everyone who hears the message of grace takes it to heart; their heart will remain cold. But for those who have ears to hear, and eyes to see, the message of grace and love transforms broken people into whole people; it turns paupers into kings. That's what it means to be redeemed.

When we witness a tragedy like the one in Newtown, Connecticut, we often wonder whether there is any hope for humanity. In reality, the tragedy only affirms what the Bible has taught us

since the beginning: people are broken, and without the grace and love of Jesus Christ we are destined to futility, trying to fix a problem we've created with efforts that only address the symptoms, and not the deeper brokenness.

Yet hope still reigns.

Because in the midst of this darkness, and in the midst of this tragedy, God has chosen a people—his church—to proclaim his mercy and grace and point them back to the true solution, Jesus Christ. *He* is the hope of the world. And he enters this world not through rules and not through legislation, but through unrestricted, unregulated, unending, and undeserved, love.

*For God so loved the world that he sent his only son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

And one day, all things will be renewed, in Him.

With Hope,

Jeremy Mulder