

After Parkland School Killings, Students Across the U.S. Launch Protests Against Gun Violence

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In the News

At Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, where students returned to class last week, things will never be the same.

On February 14, a 19-year-old former student armed with an AR-15 style semi-automatic rifle and multiple magazines that he bought legally, entered the building, where he shot and killed 14 students and three staff members and wounded 14 others, making the tragedy the second most deadly school massacre in the United States, and possibly one of the 10 most deadly worldwide.

Aside from its high body count, the killing was, sadly, another in what has become an all-too-common occurrence. This time, however, the atrocity launched a wave of student demonstrations reaching from Arizona to Maine. Just a week after the deadly shooting, students at dozens of U.S. high schools walked out of class to protest gun violence and honor the victims.

Hundreds of students from Maryland schools left class to rally at the U.S. Capitol. Daniel Gelillo, a senior at Richard Montgomery High in Rockville, Maryland, helped organize the protest and said students aimed to pressure lawmakers to increase restrictions on firearms.

"The Orlando shooting, Las Vegas and now Parkland," Gelillo said. "Something has to happen. Innocent people are dying because of the easy access to firearms in this country."

Hundreds more left their schools in cities from Chicago to Pittsburgh to Austin, Texas, often at the lunch hour. In Florida schools, thousands walked out.

At the protest in Washington, students held a moment of silence in memory of those killed in Parkland and listened as the names of the dead were recited.

In California, a student walkout turned violent, with rock throwing and vandalism, resulting in the arrest of some students.

At a rally in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, on the Saturday following the shooting, Parkland senior Emma Gonzales called out lawmakers and gun advocates, leading the assembled listeners in labeling the usual arguments against increases firearms restrictions "BS."

At a later rally, organized by cable network CNN, she railed against Dana Loesch, a spokeswoman for the National Rifle Association for failing to "support" her own children because Loesch disagreed with Gonzales. Some are calling Gonzales a "hero" while others are praising Loesch for keeping her cool.

Other walkouts have been planned, including on March 14, one month after the Florida shooting, and on April 20, the anniversary of the Columbine High School massacre in Colorado. On March 24, the youth led *March for our Lives* will be happening across the nation.

Some students said their opinions have been belittled because of their young age, but they point out that they'll soon be voters. Some said they're taking a stand in favor of firearms restrictions because lawmakers haven't.

Some who disagree with the actions the teens are advocating consider the teens to be pawns of adults with a gun-control agenda.

A side story to the tragedy is the staggering number of warnings law enforcement and school authorities received beforehand about the young man who became the shooter, and about the failure to act on them.

At minimum, students involved in these protests are calling for limits on AR-15 rifles, the weapon authorities say the shooter used in the Florida attack, and raising the age for gun ownership to 21.

One of the things that makes the Parkland school shooting different from other such attacks is that it has resulted in the mobilization of teenagers taking up the cause of gun control. There's no reason to think they are smarter or wiser than adults who have wrestled with this issue, but young people do bring passion, idealism and energy to the matter. And some bring first-hand experience of being survivors of a massacre in their school.

Today's lesson gives us an opportunity to consider what the Bible says about youthful leadership and to think about the cause these particular youth are rallying around.

1 Timothy 4:12

Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. (For context, read 4:6-16.)

The letter of 1 Timothy is presented as correspondence from the apostle Paul to Timothy, his younger coworker, who was leading the church in Ephesus. The comment above is included in a longer section (see context) where the author encourages his younger colleague to be a good minister of Jesus Christ.

Although Paul refers to Timothy's youth, the implication is not that Timothy was a teenager, but only that he was considerably younger than Paul. At the time of the letter, Timothy was probably about 30 years old: The Greek word *neotetos* was commonly used for a man of military age, roughly 16 to 40. Nonetheless, the verse has traditionally been used to encourage young believers in Christ and to call them to be models of godliness at their present age rather than delaying all that to adulthood.

Questions: When and to what degree should young people be expected to demonstrate leadership in the culture at large? Why?

1 Kings 12:8

But [King Rehoboam] disregarded the advice that the older men gave him, and consulted with the young men who had grown up with him and now attended him. (For context, read 12:1-20.)

Rehoboam had recently inherited Israel's throne from his father Solomon, who had burdened the people with heavy taxes and forced labor. A delegation of the people asked Rehoboam to lighten the burden on the people. The king asked for three days to consider. The older men who had been Solomon's counselors advised Rehoboam to be a servant-king and agree. However, the young men among his counselors advised him to reject the people's request and instead increase their burden. He took the young men's advice and rejected the request. Consequently, the people rebelled, and the kingdom was split.

This story is not so much about the advice of old versus young, but more about pride and power. Still, it does show the value of older age in tempering the arrogance and party spirit inherent in people, which the greater energy and passion of the young can often exacerbate -- and which they sometimes regret as they gain life experience.

Questions: What are some examples of youthful decisions that "seemed right at the time" but which you later viewed as folly or harmful? Have you ever said to yourself, "Now why did I ever do that?" How can you seek the advice of someone more experienced?

Jeremiah 1:4-9

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth." (For context, read 1:4-10.)

Here Jeremiah narrates his call to be a prophet of the Lord, a call that Jeremiah said came while he was "only a boy." The Lord, however, viewed Jeremiah's young age as no barrier to his doing God's will.

Questions: To what degree, if at all, might God be putting his words in the mouths of young people who have rallied for gun safety? On what basis do you make that judgment?

1 Samuel 3:10

Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." (For context, read 3:1-21.)

When Eli, the adult religious leader of the Israelites, failed to do the Lord's will, the Lord called instead the young boy Samuel who was serving in the temple with him. Eli was helpful to Samuel in this instance in telling him that it was the Lord speaking, but the word Samuel received was that Eli was about to be punished and superseded.

Questions: When have you been able to offer helpful guidance to a young person? When has a young person's actions been so right that they put you to shame about your own?

Prayer

O God, help us in this beautiful but dangerous world to make good decisions that promote the safety of all. Help us to get past the partisanship in Congress and our nation in general to work for the common good. In Jesus' name. Amen.