

How Should We View Youth Activists?

Rise & Shine, October 7th

1 Timothy 4:6, 11-12

If you put these instructions before the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed. ... These are the things you must insist on and teach. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.

Questions:

1. What is the most profound lesson you have ever learned from a child or young person?
 2. When you were younger, were your views or opinions ever ignored, minimized or discounted because of your age and inexperience?
 3. How do we decide when to accept, question, or disregard what children or youth say?
 4. No matter what you believe about their causes, how do you think Christians should respond to young activists who feel anxious about their own future?
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In the News

Youth Across the Globe are Becoming Active in Social Protests

Last Friday an estimated four million students and supportive adults in over 200 nations skipped school to stage more than 3,000 protests on every continent, including Antarctica, calling on political and business leaders to take urgent action to avert environmental catastrophe due to climate change.

With new technological tools now available, youth are organizing throughout the world in unprecedented ways about issues that concern them. At the top of their list has been climate change and gun control.

Youth activists are speaking out, staging walkouts, and participating in rallies and protests that support their causes. At the heart of many of these young peoples' protests include the fact that many of them fear that the problems they face will grow too large to address by the time that they are able to vote. Since they cannot use their money or political will to affect change, they take to the streets in protest.

Many of those demonstrating last week were inspired by 16-year-old Swede Greta Thunberg, who garnered fame for her speeches and actions opposing climate change. Others have been inspired by Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School senior Emma Gonzales, who became notable after leading impassioned rallies following the shooting at her school in February.

Thunberg's activism began at the age of 8, when she first heard about climate change and how little was being done to address it. Her parents say that she became so depressed that she stopped eating and talking. After convincing her parents to make several significant lifestyle changes to reduce the family's own carbon footprint, Thunberg wanted to do more. That's when she began her sit-in at the Swedish parliament. Her solitary stance began to be noticed, resulting in numerous invitations to speak to the global elite.

For her part, Emma Gonzales called out lawmakers and gun advocates after the Parkland school shooting, leading the assembled listeners in labeling the usual arguments against increases firearms restrictions "BS." At a later rally 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 called Gonzales a "hero" while others praised Loesch for keeping her cool.

These types of youth activists have been widely credited with changing the conversation on many issues, thanks to their fast-moving social-media savvy and capitalization on the progress forged by older activist groups, such as Moms Demand Action, Black Lives Matter, and the Rainforest Alliance. That also makes them a target for opponents of their causes.

Some argue that Gonzales, Thunberg, and other protesters are pawns being manipulated and exploited by hidden figures with a political and economic agenda. Propaganda analyst Scott Adams writes that "Adults sometimes like to use children to carry their messages because it makes it hard for the other side to criticize them without seeming like monsters."

Opponents wishing to discredit Thunberg have attacked her for her autism and called her mental health into question. Some have characterized her mother and father as "fame-seeking ... stage parents," ... nothing more than child abusers who were "pimp(ing) her out."

Similarly, Gonzalez was derided for her appearance, with one politician even publicly calling her a “skinhead lesbian.” Another mocked her for wearing a patch of the Cuban flag, ignoring the fact that it is common practice in Florida for anti-Castro residents of Cuban ancestry also display the flag.

Thunberg called such criticism a badge of honor: “When the only thing people can do is mock you, or talk about your appearance or personality, ... it means they have no argument or nothing else to say.”

While some support what these young people are doing to speak out for issues that they believe in, others deride their activism as making an already contentious debate even less civil. Rich Lowry of the National Review wrote that “they are teenagers, who universally believe that they know better than their hapless elders.” His argument is that by smearing the people who oppose the issues that they stand for, these young people go a bit too far.

David Hogg, another activist from Stoneman Douglas High School, said that the NRA and its supporters “want to keep killing our children,” not that they inadvertently enable people who carry out school shootings via misconceived policy. Hogg added, “they could have blood from children spattered all over their faces and they wouldn’t take action because they will still see those dollar signs.”

Greta Thunberg chided UN representatives saying “You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words...” and asking “How dare you continue to look away?”

Whether you agree with youth activists like Thunberg or not... whether you respect their passion or question the motives behind the adults that support them... they are making a difference. What makes Greta Thunberg and other youth activists so unique is their ability to elicit action from ordinary people. Thunberg’s influence could be seen in last week’s climate strike, where protesters in New Zealand carried signs exclaiming “For the Greta Good” and “What Greta said!”

Youth activist’s rise to popularity is largely due to the international community’s sympathy for children. Many believe that the media wouldn’t pay the same attention to an educated adult advocating for the same cause. Many adults seem to believe that if the youth have to come forward and accuse them of failure, then they must listen.

Acts 2:16-18

*[Peter explained]: "No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:
'In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.'"*

Matthew 7:9-11

[Jesus asked,] "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

Prayer for Young Persons (BCP p.829)

God our Father, you see your children growing up in an unsteady and confusing world: Show them that your ways give more life than the ways of the world, and that following you is better than chasing after selfish goals. Help them to take failure, not as a measure of their worth, but as a chance for a new start. Give them strength to hold their faith in you, and to keep alive their joy in your creation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*