

PREVENTING SCHOOL VIOLENCE THROUGH DEVELOPING CHRISTIAN CHARACTER

LEADERS: Parents and students alike worry about school violence. An October, 2000 USA Today survey found teens rating “School Violence” as their number one concern (60%), more than their concerns for drug and alcohol abuse, crime, racism or AIDS.

What can we as youth leaders do to help prevent school violence? The FBI’s recent report, entitled “*The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective,*” gives us some valuable information on the personality traits and behaviors of students who have pulled the trigger on their fellow students. They found these traits by doing an in-depth review of eighteen school shooting cases. Additionally they drew from 25 years of wisdom gleaned by their *National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime* and conducted a symposium of 160 educators, administrators, mental health professionals, law enforcement officers and prosecutors.

In reading the list of character traits and behavior, I was struck by the fact that each of these characteristics are addressed in the bible. In other words, if we can teach on, model, and multiply disciples who model biblical character for their friends, churches can help prevent violence. The character traits taught in the Bible are the antidote to the 28 characteristics of violent students identified by the FBI.

Additionally, this message is a proof that the Bible is truth. Thousands of years prior to the FBI study, the Bible gave us the principles to live by that would save us from becoming violent. In other words, the Bible works!

Below I’ve summarized each of these 28 character and behavior traits and given a Scripture that urges us to root these characteristics out of our lives. Obviously you can’t cover all 28 in one session. You may want to prepare a message that concentrates on a few of the most prominent characteristics and close it with the Cassie Bernall illustration. Or perhaps you want to spread this out as a series on Christian Character. I’ve not taken the time to fully develop this study with discussions, activities and illustrations. But in the wake of this week’s school shooting in southern California and the copy cat shootings that followed, I felt that many youth ministers would want to address this topic while it’s hot on students’ minds.

For some helpful recommended resources on school violence, go to Youth Specialties page at <http://www.youthspecialties.com/free/violence.html>

For the full 46 page FBI report in PDF format, go to <http://www.fbi.gov/library/school/school2.pdf>. It’s an easy read and will give you more detail on each of the characteristics I list.

INTRODUCTION

When we experience violence in our schools and see news reports of school shootings, our hearts break for those who are personally impacted. (Leader: describe a recent incident and your reaction to it here.) Some of us are bewildered and ask the “Why?” question. But today I’d like to take us a step further and ask, “*What can we do to make a difference?*” You say, “*Me? What could I possibly do to make my school a safer place?*”

Over the past few years experts have come together to study incidences of school violence and are beginning to piece together the common characteristics of those who may one day harm others. For example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) released a paper based on their careful scrutiny of 18 cases of school shootings. The amazing thing is that thousands of years ago God warned us to root these very characteristics out of our lives. If we heed His Word, we can guard ourselves from becoming violent. And if we can model godly character for our fellow students, we just might impact their lives and lead them off the path to destruction.

I’m convinced that you and I can make a difference. But first we’ve got to know the characteristics often present in those who turn violent. (Please note: just because someone exhibits many of these characteristics doesn’t mean that he will eventually hurt other people. It’s not possible to build a profile that fits every case.)

Let’s pray that God will work in our hearts. (Let someone lead in prayer.)

CHARACTERISTIC #1 – LEAKAGE – They reveal their violent thoughts, feelings, fantasies, attitudes or intentions. For example, they may constantly talk about or show a fascination with violence, hopelessness, despair, hatred, prejudice, death, or the use of weapons.

ANTIDOTE:

“Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.” (Phil. 4:8; cr. Proverbs 15:28; 4:23; 6:18; 24:2; Ecc. 10:12-14; Eph. 4:29; 5:4)

If you constantly talk about darkness, negative things and violence, don’t kid yourself into thinking you’re just going through a phase. Something is wrong. Ask God for help and talk to your minister of youth.

CHARACTERISTIC #2 – LOW TOLERANCE FOR FRUSTRATION – They’re easily hurt and angered when they think someone has done them wrong.

ANTIDOTE:

“Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” (Col. 3:13; cr. Mt. 5:11,12,44; 6:14,15; I Cor. 6:7; II Tim. 2:24)

CHARACTERISTIC #3 – POOR COPING SKILLS – They can’t deal with frustration, criticism, disappointment, failure, rejection or humiliation.

ANTIDOTE:

“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” (Lk. 6:27,28; cr. 29,30; Rom. 12:14)

CHARACTERISTIC #4 – LACK OF RESILIENCY – They can’t bounce back, even a long time after a frustration, disappointment, setback or putdown.

ANTIDOTE:

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. (II Cor. 4:7-11)

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” (II Cor. 4:16,17, cr. Rom. 8:35-39; I Cor. 4:11-13; 15:58; Phil. 4:13)

CHARACTERISTIC #5 – FAILED LOVE RELATIONSHIP – They can’t deal with the humiliation or rejection.

ANTIDOTE:

“For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you; plans to give you hope and a future.” (Jeremiah 29:11; cr. Jn. 10:10; Ps. 37:4)

God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. If that guy or girl was not the one for you, take cheer in the fact that either God will change his or her heart, or He has someone even better for you!

CHARACTERISTIC #6 – INJUSTICE COLLECTOR – They refuse to forget past wrongs and to forgive those who have wronged them.

ANTIDOTE:

“Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:31,32; cr. Mt. 6:14,15)

CHARACTERISTIC #7 – SIGNS OF DEPRESSION – They may have a dark outlook on life, be apathetic or gloomy and lose interest in activities they once enjoyed.

ANTIDOTE:

“Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.” (Jn. 16:24; cr. 10:10; I Thes. 5:16-18; Jms. 1:2-4)

CHARACTERISTIC #8 – NARCISSISM – They may be so consumed with self and their own importance that they don’t see the needs and feelings of others.

ANTIDOTE:

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus....” (Phil. 2:3-5; cr. 2:6-8; Rom. 12:15)

CHARACTERISTIC #9 – ALIENATION – They may feel that they don’t fit in, don’t belong, are isolated and lonely.

ANTIDOTE:

“Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.” (Ecc. 4:9-12; Eph. 2:13,14,19-22; Heb. 3:13; 10:24,25)

CHARACTERISTIC #10 – DEHUMANIZES OTHERS – They may not see others as objects rather than people.

ANTIDOTE:

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” (Col. 3:12; cr. I Jn. 4:7,8)

CHARACTERISTIC #11 – LACK OF EMPATHY – They neither understand nor seem concerned about other’s feelings.

ANTIDOTE:

“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.” (Rom. 12:15; cr. Mt. 9:35-38)

CHARACTERISTIC #12 – EXAGGERATED SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT – They expect special treatment and consideration.

ANTIDOTE:

“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.” (Rom. 12:10; II Cor. 4:7ff.)

CHARACTERISTIC #13 – ATTITUDE OF SUPERIORITY – They may think they are smarter, more talented, more creative and more experienced than others.

ANTIDOTE:

“Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.” (Rom. 12:16; cr. Jn. 3:30; I Cor. 13:1-3; II Cor. 12:11)

CHARACTERISTIC #14 - EXAGGERATED OR PATHOLOGICAL NEED FOR ATTENTION – The attention may be either positive or negative.

ANTIDOTE:

“Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mt. 16:24; Gal. 2:20)

CHARACTERISTIC #15 – EXTERNALIZES BLAME – They refuse to take responsibility for their own actions. Either a circumstance or another person is always blamed.

ANTIDOTE:

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.” (I Jn. 1:8-10)

CHARACTERISTIC #16 – MASKS LOW SELF-ESTEEM – Although they may come across as arrogant, they may feel worthless inside.

ANTIDOTE:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness....’” (Gen. 1:26; cr. Ps. 8:3ff.; Jms. 3:9)

CHARACTERISTIC #17 – ANGER MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS – Their expressions of anger are inappropriate, like bursting out in temper tantrums or brooding in silence. They may express hatred or prejudice toward people. The anger may be unpredictable and uncontrollable, out of proportion to the cause, or directed at people who had nothing to do with the incident.

ANTIDOTE:

“In your anger do not sin’: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry....” (Eph. 4:26; cr. 4:31; Mt. 5:22; Gal. 5:20)

CHARACTERISTIC #18 – INTOLERANCE – They express racial or religious prejudice or intolerant attitudes.

ANTIDOTE:

“Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” (Col. 3:11; Rom. 15:5-7)

CHARACTERISTIC #19 – INAPPROPRIATE HUMOR – Their jokes and comments may be gruesome or insulting and belittling to others.

ANTIDOTE:

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” (Eph. 4:29; cr. 5:4; Col. 3:8; Mt. 12:34)

CHARACTERISTIC #20 – SEEKS TO MANIPULATE OTHERS – They try to con others so that people won’t suspect the way they really are.

ANTIDOTE:

“Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body.” (Eph. 4:25; cr. Col. 3:9; Eph. 4:22,25)

CHARACTERISTIC #21 – LACK OF TRUST – They are suspicious of other’s motives and may think there is no institution they could trust to achieve justice or resolve a conflict. If wrongs are to be righted, they must take it into their own hands.

ANTIDOTE:

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do

not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." (Rom. 12:17-19; cr. 20,21; Mt. 5:38-42)

CHARACTERISTIC #22 – CLOSED SOCIAL GROUP – They may either have no real friends or associate with a single small group that excludes everyone else. If the group is very negative, the person is more likely to be violent.

ANTIDOTE:

"Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'" (I Cor. 15:33; cr. Ecc. 4:9ff.)

CHARACTERISTIC #23 – CHANGE OF BEHAVIOR – They may begin to disregard school rules and schedules and decline in academic performance.

ANTIDOTE:

"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God." (Rom. 13:1; cr. 13:2-7; Eph. 6:1-3)

CHARACTERISTIC #24 – RIGID AND OPINIONATED – They may disregard all contrary facts in order to hold their judgmental and strong opinions on subjects they know little about.

ANTIDOTE:

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (Mt. 7:1,2; cr. 7:3-5; Jude 16)

CHARACTERISTIC #25 – UNUSUAL INTEREST IN SENSATIONAL VIOLENCE – They may openly admire people who have been heavily publicized for committing acts of violence.

ANTIDOTE:

"Do not envy a violent man or choose any of his ways...." (Prov. 3:31; 24:1,2)

CHARACTERISTIC #26 – FASCINATION WITH VIOLENCE-FILLED ENTERTAINMENT – They may be obsessed with violent video games and movies that focus on violence, hatred, control, power, death and destruction. They may search the web for information on weapons.

ANTIDOTE:

“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” (Rom. 12:9; cr. Phil. 4:8)

CHARACTERISTIC #27 – NEGATIVE ROLE MODELS – They may openly admire Hitler, Satan or others associated with violence and destruction.

ANTIDOTE:

“Do not envy a violent man or choose any of his ways....” (Prov. 3:31)

CHARACTERISTIC #28 – BEHAVIOR APPEARS RELEVANT TO CARRYING OUT A THREAT – They may spend unusual amounts of time practicing with firearms or visiting violent websites to the exclusion of normal activities.

“There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil....” (Prov. 6:16-18; cr. 15:26; 24:1,2; Jer. 22:17)

Conclusion

Today you may have been shocked to find some of these dangerous character traits in your own life. You may recognize them in some of your friends. It doesn't mean that you or they will one day shoot up your school. But recognizing these traits in your life should be a wake up call. Something's wrong. It's time to make a change before things get worse. I end with the story of Cassie Bernall, who was killed at Columbine High School. I share it because I think it well illustrates how anyone can make the journey from being a part of the problem to being a part of the solution, from flirting with the darkness to living in the light.

ILLUSTRATION: *Cassie Bernall became known worldwide as a 17-year-old student who died in the April, 1999 massacre at Columbine High School. Although her strong faith in God was broadcast around the world, most never knew of her journey through the dark side of life and how God set her free.*

Cassie's journey to the dark side wasn't because of a miserable home life. As a child, her parents adored her. Each morning her dad would sit on the side of her bed, sing a little good-morning song to her, and tell her, "Have a good day, Cassie, I'll see you tonight." Her dad took her for rides on his dirt bike. They had enough money to buy her pets and toys and nice clothes.

But her childhood happiness began to slip away when she got with the wrong friends in the 5th grade - students who dabbled in satanic rituals. Their view of life became her view of life. Very slowly, subtly, over the next few years, the glasses through which she viewed the world became darker and darker till she could not longer see any good in the world. One day her mom was looking for a Bible in Cassie's room when she ran across some letters addressed to Cassie from her best friend. What she found devastated her.

The friend's letters were full of occult drawings, spells, excitement about a Satanist church where people had to drink a kitten's blood to enter, horrific drawings of a man and woman hanging by their intestines and daggers protruding from their hearts. Incredibly, the drawings were labeled "Ma and Pa" - Cassie's parents. Her friend was obsessed with death. One of the letters said, "...kill me with your parents, then kill yourself so you don't go to jail." Cassie told one of her friends that she was planning to kill one of her teachers.

Her parents took drastic action, forbidding her to see her friends, and putting her in a new school. Cassie became obsessed with suicide and would scratch her hands and wrists with a sharp metal file until they bled. She hated her parents. She hated her miserable life. Cassie later wrote these words in a paper for an English class: "Throughout this time I hated my parents and God with the deepest, darkest hatred. There are no words that can accurately describe the blackness I felt..."

Now think with me for a minute. What is going on here? On the outside, Cassie has a lot going for her. She's got parents who love her, feed her, and give her nice things. She's getting a free education in a great school. She lives in a nice, warm house in a nice neighborhood. Millions of kids around the world would give anything to have what she has. What has happened? (Get some discussion here.) Something has happened inside Cassie's mind. She has allowed herself to become blinded to God's love and the good things around her. She's become obsessed with the dark side. If something hadn't happened to open up her eyes, she could have very well become one of the murderers at Columbine High.

From a biblical point of view, I think we can assume that what went on here was more than just a natural process. Cassie later said that she had given her soul to Satan and felt gripped by the powers of darkness. Her parents couldn't make any progress trying to talk to her rationally. Her mom came to see that a spiritual battle was going on. She tried to go into Cassie's room one day and couldn't bring herself to enter. When she finally did, in her own words, "I can't quite describe it, but it felt like you could almost cut the air in that room with a knife, the atmosphere was so oppressive." She felt for certain that there was more to this than just a rebellious teenager. She began to cry and pray for God to break through.

The next chapter of the story is dramatic. A Christian at her new school befriended her and invited her to a weekend retreat in the Rocky Mountains. One night at the retreat, God broke through to her during a praise and worship service. The change was almost instantaneous. Her dark "glasses" fell off. After the service, Cassie and a few others began to look up at the stars. They stood there in silence, totally in awe of the loving God she had once hated.

Her parents noticed the change when she stepped off the bus. She had left gloomy, with her head down, saying nothing. She came back bouncy and excited. Listen carefully to her dad's own words, "It was as if she had been in a dark room, and somebody had

turned the light on, and she could suddenly see the beauty surrounding her." They saw the smile that had disappeared years ago. She began to love and respect her parents and her brother. Grace had been all around her, but for the first time in years she could finally see it. (Written by Steve Miller. Summarized from the book: She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall, by Misty Bernall, Plough Publishers, 1999)

Some of you can probably identify with the dark view of the world that Cassie formerly had. Have you ever wondered why you think that only negative lyrics are cool – lyrics about death, destruction, hate and revenge? Have you ever wondered why you think all positive lyrics are wimpy and gutless? Maybe you haven't gone as far to the dark side as Cassie did, but if you've become negative and cynical about the world, and you're not "happy" unless you're complaining, you're on the same path. If you're on that path, I challenge you, I plead with you to ask God to intervene. Ask Him to break through and open up your eyes.

ACTION POINTS

- **As Christians, we need to trust in God's power** to root these attitudes and actions from our lives.
- **Those who have never trusted Christ for their salvation should receive Him as their Savior and Lord.** Only then can you become a new creature in Christ (II Cor. 5:17), have the Holy Spirit residing within (Romans 8:9) and have the power to change (Phil. 4:13).
- **Don't assume that all those who exhibit some of these characteristics are dangerous.** Some students say startling things simply to get attention.
- **We can make a difference by reaching as many students as possible** for the Lord so that they can begin the process of becoming like Christ (Matthew 5:13-16).

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