

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The relevance of God in 2008: Christianity and Bullying

I remember many happy car journeys when the children were younger, listening to the story of the BFG to the uninitiated, Roald Dahl's *The Big Friendly Giant*. The effects of the frobscottle caused much amusement, but I think my favourite part was where Sophie was shown a special room by the BFG. In it, arranged on shelves, were jars with all sorts of dreams inside. Labels on the jars indicated what sort of dream was inside. Well, that was just a work of fiction, but it conjured up a picture in my mind of a similar room in heaven – the tears room. On the door to that room are the words, found in Psalm 56:8, “You number my wanderings; put my tears into Your bottle.” Inside, on neatly arranged shelves, are each and every tear that a child of God has ever shed – those that have fallen to the ground, and those that don't even make it to the eyes yet still rake the heart. The Psalmist had a very clear belief that his God numbered every step that he took, allowing him not one more than was good for him. Along the way, through the good times and the bad, his God was there to collect each tear, as something that was precious and to be kept by God. Such is the loving concern of the heavenly Father for each of His children.

This morning, as we consider our series looking at issues that will affect many believers today, we come to the subject of bullying. It is very much with a sense that, even with some personal experience, we need to tread very gently, as so much pain is caused by bullying and so many lives are damaged. I can offer no easy answers for there are none. As we shall see, bullying has been going on for thousands of years, and still the devil causes his misery. I want this morning to begin by looking at what we mean by bullying generally and how prevalent it is, before going on to consider some good general advice. As Christians, we are not immune from this, and good advice does not necessarily have to have a chapter and verse. However, I do believe that there is a particularly Christian aspect to this subject that those, who do not have a faith in Jesus as the only Saviour, cannot share. So we shall look at two examples from the Bible of those who experienced bullying and the lessons that they learned from this, before looking at three New Testament verses that have a bearing upon this subject. Finally, we shall consider what the Bible has to say to those who may be a bully.

Before we go any further, then, let us define what we mean by bullying. The definition I think is most easily understood is “the repeated misuse of power or position that undermines a person's ability, or leaves them feeling hurt, frightened, angry or powerless.”

The four key aspects to this then are:

1. **Repeated** – we are not thinking of an isolated incident when somebody behaves in an unpleasant way towards us. We do not want to encourage a victim culture, where we have all been bullied. This is unfair to those who day in, day out face a struggle just to get out of bed each day, fearful of what the day may bring.
2. **Misuse of power or position** – all bullying is wrong. Sadly many measures that are taken today tend to try to minimise the effects of bullying rather than confronting the wrongness of the actions, and the causes of those actions. This may be physical or verbal at school, or in the workplace. Constant unfair criticism or unrealistic expectations, unreasonable workloads or isolation are all just as bad as a black eye or being called some unpleasant name.
3. **Undermines a person's ability** – here we come to the real wrongness of bullying. God created each one of us to reflect His person in some way. He wants us to be the best we can be. Anything that prevents each one of us fulfilling that potential is an affront against God. It hinders us from being the people God intended us to be.
4. **Leaves them feeling ...** – what is at issue is not what was intended by the bully, but how the recipient perceives the act. Too often something may be said “only for a bit of a laugh”, but if it causes harm then it is every bit as wrong as an intentional desire to hurt. It really is important to watch what we say, or what we expect of others. They may not share our sense of humour, our ability to cope or our thick skin!

Two websites I found helpful are www.andreaadamstrust.org and www.bullying.co.uk. It is impossible to quantify the scale of the problem bullying causes, but estimates are that nearly 19 million working days a year are lost due to

bullying. One can only guess at how many school days are lost, as sniffles become reason to stay away. Around half of stress related illness may be a direct result of bullying. Around one in four of the UK's 60 million population – 15 million people – has been the victim of severe bullying. It affects us all – Christian and non-Christian alike, for it is almost always impersonal.

The first thing to remember when experiencing bullying is that there is nothing wrong with you.

The fact that you are singled out is almost always an unfortunate coincidence. It could just as likely have been somebody else, and often is. For me it was big front teeth, a lisp and the fact that I hadn't had a girlfriend before I was 17! Too fat, too thin, too ugly - the list is endless and immaterial. The real problem is that the bully is almost always jealous of the victim. They identify in somebody else something that they lack and so mock that person to try to raise themselves up to the same level. If you are being bullied at the moment, it is important to realise that it is not you who has the problem. If others cannot accept you for who you are then it is they who have the problem.

Secondly, and probably the single most important thing, is to tell someone.

Bullying thrives on secrecy. Sometimes the person you tell may not be able to do anything particular to make the bullying stop, but the emotional release of sharing the burden is a large first step to recovery. Sometimes bullying can be so bad that it prompts suicidal thoughts and actions. It really is vital that you do not suffer alone and that you find someone to share the burden. Parents, teachers, work colleagues, social friends are all possible candidates.

For there is some truth in the adage that "a problem shared is a problem halved". Each life is much too precious to be sacrificed to bullying – and there is always a hope for tomorrow. Often, in the middle of suffering, this is impossible to see. But it is still true. And if you are told – don't fly off the handle. It may have taken considerable courage for the bullied person to admit the problem and the last thing they need is another angry person to deal with. Very often, all they want is for someone to listen to them.

Thirdly, keep a diary.

If the bullying is in the workplace, where a grievance procedure is likely to result, having an accurate record of events or words, and when and by whom is essential. Even in a school situation this may prove useful. It must be unexaggerated. You may feel that nobody in the class or office likes you, but in reality, it is probably just a core group of a few.

Fourthly, make other friends or try to constructively avoid obvious danger points.

I joined the basketball team, the chess club, the debating society – though I was rubbish at all three, to avoid standing around at lunchtimes at school. Financial considerations may not allow an employee to walk away from a bullying boss, but getting involved with other people outside of work is of great value. In some cases, it may prove possible to befriend the bully, though this is often difficult. Often bullying will leave an individual feeling the whole world is against them, or that they are in some way deficient. The building of bridges and making of friends with others will go some way to restoring a person's confidence.

Fifthly, focus on something positive and deliberately make an effort to ensure there is something good to think about.

This may be something as simple as making a really nice evening meal or engaging in a particular hobby. Although spending your way out of trouble is not the answer, there are times in life when, for a short time, a little pampering out of the ordinary can prove extremely helpful in giving a reason to get out of bed in the morning. Acute periods of bullying do tend to be short lived, though to the person being bullied it does seem to go on forever. It is during these times that a particular effort needs to be made. Parents of a child, who is being bullied, for example, may need to make an especial effort during the evenings to make school more bearable. Other commitments may have to take a back seat for a while.

Finally, never accept bullying as acceptable behaviour.

Children don't just need to toughen up, or employees to get on with it. As a Christian it is always right to forgive – even a bully. But this does in no way mean that we just let them carry on, as we don't want them to get into trouble. Nearly half of all bullies will be in trouble with the law by the time they are 24! It is an act of kindness to stop them when they are young. We would never stand by a bank while it is being robbed and, because we do not want to get the robbers into trouble, not call the police. The right Christian response to bullying must always be that, on a personal level, I bear no ill will towards the bully. This is much easier said than done both for the victim, and parents of a victim. It is necessary, though, to stop bitterness causing further misery. However, this personal forgiveness must be coupled with

a determination to stop the bully from further sinning. Most companies should have a formal grievance procedure, and this is where the keeping of a diary is so important. Schools must be made to take serious actions when charges of bullying are made in a calm and rational manner.

I want now to move on to consider how being a Christian may particularly influence the issue of bullying. It is of course nothing new. There are two clear examples of those who were bullied in the Old Testament. You may recall the story of Joseph. He was hated by his own brothers who persecuted him at home for the favour he was shown by his father. This led to his being thrown into a pit, before being sold as a slave. Later, in Egypt, as a worker in Potiphar's house he was sexually bullied by Potiphar's wife, who, as she could not get her own way with Joseph, made false accusations against him, so that he was thrown into prison. If anyone had a grim childhood and work life it must have been Joseph. For a period of maybe some 10 to 20 years life must have seemed to Joseph a pretty cruel place to be. And yet God had a purpose in it. It was not that God caused the bullying or condoned it in any way. But He was able to use it for the ultimate good of Joseph, and many more besides.

In Psalm 105:17-18, we read "Joseph – who was sold as a slave. They hurt his feet with fetters, he was laid in irons". The last phrase could be translated literally as "iron came into his soul." I believe that accurately describes the effect of the experiences that Joseph went through. From the pampered favourite son of an aging father, Joseph became a man of iron will – a man who was able to save the then known world. It was the very harshness of the experiences that Joseph went through that forced him to rely upon God and gave him the inner strength that made him second in all of Egypt, after Pharaoh himself. Had Joseph remained at home, at ease and favoured, he may well have become an arrogant idle adult, quite unusable by God. Bullying is never pleasant. In fact I can think of few things worse. But for the Christian it is not without purpose. In times to come, God may well use these bitter experiences to produce a person who is really useful to Him.

Then we have Hannah. Because she was unable to have children, we read in 1 Samuel 1:6: "And her rival also provoked her severely, to make her miserable, because the LORD had closed her womb." For how many years had this gone on we can only guess. What we do know is that it made Hannah so sad that she cried in absolute anguish in the public place of the tabernacle. She was oblivious of how she appeared to others as she pleaded with God for a son. As the story develops, she gives birth to baby Samuel, who when weaned, is taken to the tabernacle, there to serve God. How could a mother who had so wanted a baby give him up? I am sure that through all the merciless taunts of Peninnah, she had found a true friend in God. It was in this God, whom she had come to know so well, that she could have absolute confidence to care for her precious son. It is a lovely touch to see that she was later to have other sons and daughters. Our God is no man's debtor!

These two Old Testament saints very much proved the truth of what Paul could write to the Romans in chapter 8 verse 28: "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." It is certainly not easy, nor does it minimise the very real misery that bullying does cause. But as Christians, we can go through life with the absolute conviction that in every circumstance God is able to work out His will for the good of the individual, and for the good of others. Maybe during real times of distress, it is worth just writing down these words and fixing them to the wall above our beds. Through tears it is then possible to bring them to God and say, "Your will be done". I am sure, too, that in the loneliness of the prison cell, or the emptiness of the family home, Joseph and Hannah discovered the truth of the wonderful promise, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5).

At times when we find other human beings so utterly horrible, then we can find that He is absolutely wonderful. He accepts us unconditionally, always there, always available. In His trial before the chief priests and Pilate, and then on the cross, He endured the worst kind of bullying. So now He identifies Himself fully with His people, His body. That was why on the road to Damascus, the Lord did not say to Saul, "Why are you persecuting My people?" but "Why are you persecuting Me?" I now feel sorry for those who bullied me at school, for one day they will find that in doing so they have not persecuted me but Christ. It is not coincidental that those who have written the most powerful hymns, or sustained the greatest ministries have often also endured real hardship at some time in their lives. Bullying may be just such a time. Persecution, whether being thrown to the lions or being bullied, is still a part of the all things that are unable "to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

During times of particular trouble, many saints over the years have found real comfort in reading some of the Psalms. One of my favourites is Psalm 27, where in verse 5 we read: "For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion; in the secret place of His tabernacle He shall hide me; He shall set me high upon a rock." If instead of allowing bullying to drive us to loneliness, bitterness and suicidal tendencies, we can see in it an opportunity to come really close to God, to share in His intimate presence, then perhaps we will find some good and emerge a stronger person from the experience.

Finally, as we draw towards the end of the broadcast, I want to consider a word to those who may be a bully, rather than the ones who are bullied. It must go without saying that bullying is absolutely wrong. No excuses, no ifs, no buts!

We need to go back to our definition of bullying and realise that it is not our intentions that are in question. It is how the recipients feel or interpret our actions. If our words or actions undermine their ability, leaving them feeling hurt etc. then we are a bully. Claiming that we only meant it in jest, or that they are being overly sensitive, is just not the issue. Nor, in the workplace, does claiming that it got the job done, or that those above us were leaning on us, justify our actions. We really do need to remember that, for all our words and actions, we shall give an account of ourselves, receiving the things done in the body, whether good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:10)!

And let us not for one moment think that, just because we are Christians, this does not apply to us. I have been present when a young man was pretty mercilessly mocked for the fact that he did not have a girlfriend. The reason why he did not was that he seriously wanted to follow Christ, and did not feel that, as yet, the Lord had brought the right person into his life. Yet to listen to the comments made about him, and how desperate he must be, was shocking.

Then there is a particular form of spiritual bullying that goes along the lines of “unless you do as I believe what the Bible says is right then you are going astray” or “leave us, leave the Church”. I’m not talking here about those things that the Bible categorically states in black and white, that leave no room for interpretation. But there are particularly matters of behaviour or practice that have almost been elevated to unchangeable tenets of truth for some. Those who dare to question are treated with contempt and suspicion. Such bullying is the very opposite of right living, Christ-like behaviour, and ought not to be found in the Christian company.

For those who have a naturally strong personality, a real care needs to be taken that actions are not leaving others feeling frightened, angry or powerless. If we all thought a lot more, and said a lot less, then this world would truly be a much better place. From today, let us seek to live in all circumstances in such a way that we truly commend the Gospel, finding in Him all our strength and companionship!

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