

Religious Bullies: Answering the Spirit of Religion's Attacks

Fifteen-year-old Amanda Todd committed suicide after being stalked by a cyberspace bully for years. Over the weekend, I watched a YouTube video she created and, as the mother of a 15-year-old who sees firsthand the pressure today's teens face, it broke my heart.

When Todd was in seventh grade she used webcam chats to meet new people. A man pressured her to "flash" him. As she did, he captured a still image of her nudity and later sent it to everyone she knew. She lost all her friends. She sat alone at lunch. She was ridiculed and harassed by her peers. She even switched schools in hopes of a better life but this immoral bully kept right on using the nude photo to disgrace her.

Todd fell into a deep depression. She was anxiety-ridden. She started using drugs and alcohol to ease the pain. She also started cutting and tried to kill herself with bleach. After several failed suicide attempts, Todd finally succeeded in ending her misery. Ironically, October is National Bullying Prevention Month and yet another teen dies in the wake of relentless bullies.

Power-Hungry Religious Bullies

As I was reflecting on Todd's untimely death at the hand of an immoral bully, I began to think about schoolyard bullies, home front bullies, workplace bullies—and even religious bullies in the church. Bullies are everywhere you turn, and they can be just as dangerous to eternal life as the cyberstalker who pushed Todd over suicide's cliff. Indeed, **religious bullies** can push people away from Jesus or turn them off to Christianity. And the results could be an eternity beyond

heaven.

My first thought was the words Jesus used to the scribes and Pharisees, who I would describe as religious bullies: “What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You won’t go in yourselves, and you don’t let others enter either” (Matt. 23:13, NLT).

You may recognize this religious bully. It’s the same one James called out for dishonoring the poor. James said if we show partiality, we commit sin (see James 2:9). Too often, the biggest tithers are seated in the places of honor while those with less to offer are relegated to the back pews. In other words, religious bullies discriminate against the ones who can’t further their agenda. Power hungry religious browbeaters favor the ones who have something they need—and are willing to hand it over.

I cringe at the thought of how many people remain in bondage to the kingdom of darkness because highfalutin harassers refuse to accept the poor (whether they are poor financially, poor emotionally, or poor in skills to help build the church). I also wince when I think of how religious bullies have forced people out of the church because they felt threatened by their gifts and talents. Either way, Christian coercers manifest the hypocrisy that gives the church a bad name.

Pondering Pharisaical Pests

Then there are the condemnation-heaping religious antagonizers who refuse to let someone forget past mistakes. Like the bully who chased Todd around cyberspace posting nude pictures she unknowingly allowed him to capture in a lapse of judgment, **religious bullies** hold you to who you were yesterday and won’t let you get past your past mistakes.

These Pharisaical pests remind you of who you used to be despite clear evidence of the breakthrough work God has done

in your life. While God chooses not to recall the sins for which we repent, religious ruffians throw them in your face every time you try to move forward. These are the same religious bullies who spread rumors about people who leave a church to cover their own sin.

I wonder how many people have given up on fellowshiping in a church because religious oppressors remind them of their past failures. And I wonder how much momentum the body of Christ has lost because religious bullies focus more on tithing (yes, even your birthday money) while ignoring the most important aspects of the law—justice, mercy and faith (see Matt. 23:13). Yes, we should tithe and give but not while neglecting love.

Religious bullies might run in the “right” circles, dress the “right way” and say the “right” things, but inside they are filthy, full of greed and self-indulgence! (see Matt. 23:15) Jesus also called these Pharisaical bullies “whitewashed tombs—beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people’s bones and all sorts of impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matt. 23:27).

Breaking the Cycle of Religious Bullying

So how do you deal with a religious bully in the church? Bullies work through tactics like fear, manipulation, sarcasm, coercion, ridicule, cold shoulder, overreacting, blaming, using the Word as a sledgehammer, verbal attacks, gossip and the like. So the first step in dealing with a religious bully is seeing the spirit behind the bully. This is widely known as the **religious spirit**.

Pray that the religious bully would be set free from the influence of this murdering spirit. Don’t get too emotional when a religious bully confronts you—and don’t blame yourself. It’s not your fault and you haven’t done anything wrong. Religious bullies have emotional problems of their own, so don’t engage at the emotional level. Clearly, you are a threat

to the religious spirit or you wouldn't be a target.

Don't bully back. It's not worth it. Don't give in to the religious bully's intimidation, either. Ignore the religious bully's tactics if you can. Don't even dignify the bullying with a response. That's what the **religious spirit** wants—it wants to trap you with your words and make you look like the bad guy. The Pharisees constantly did this to Jesus.

If the religious bully won't back off, then don't hesitate to stand up for yourself. Jesus put the Pharisees in their place more than once, while refusing to get into a debate. When the religious bullies were abusing Jesus, He asked, "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?" (John 18:23) Turning the other cheek doesn't mean becoming a doormat. You can stand up to a religious bully without stooping to their level. Oh, and if you are a religious bully, I beseech you, repent, because Jesus has one word for you: Woe! Amen.

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