

# ***Wisdom in the Mourning***

**James 3:13-18**

It's been about a week since the horrific and tragic massacre in Las Vegas—a period of time that to me seems as long as a month ago, yet as recent as a mere moment. I've never been to Las Vegas, but I have come to know more about this place over the last few days than I've learned about cities I visited on several occasions. In my mind's eye, I can imagine staying at the Mandalay Bay Resort or being in the raucous atmosphere of the Route 91 Harvest Festival only to be paralyzed by panic in the late hours of last Sunday evening.

By any measure this was a typical all-American crowd enjoying a country-western concert—a night that portrayed the character of our collective culture. The fusion of fun, food, and family brought together by rocking entertainment seems more “motherhood and apple pie” than apple pie itself is American. It was a sweet time poignantly expressed in the crowd's chorus of “God Bless America”, barely over an hour before the shooting began. When the sniper let his evil rampage out on the crowd below with a blistering tirade of bullets, the “blessing of God” soon became the monstrous rage of hell.

In the days that have followed, the search for answers has come up empty. No one knows what led Stephen Paddock to such madness. We read that he was an average man lacking ideology, religious motivation, or racial resentment toward any particular people; we're told he regularly gambled at the casinos and even was a fan of country music. He was an accountant and made his millions doing what Americans love to do—buy and sell real estate. He left no suicide note nor any explanation or

rationale—only a legacy of unfathomable cruelty and an arsenal of 47 deadly weapons.

How can anyone make sense of this? Who could have deserved this terrible fate? The mourning for victims and their families is clearly universal, with vigils held around the country this week. Prayers and moments of silence have their place, though expressions of faith can seem somewhat trite and impotent when offered in the wake of such a slaughter. Wouldn't everyone there have felt more blessed had a miraculous intervention occurred before the gunfire erupted, rather than to look to God afterward for comfort and mercy? I can well imagine there may be those today who don't have a heart for uttering a prayer to the One who doesn't appear to intervene when the devil rises.

Yet, wrestling through theology doesn't address the underlying truth, which is: maybe in this case, it's better to examine our own souls for a bit of honest reckoning. This past week has stirred up as much emotion as any other mass shooting in this country, including Sandy Hook, Orlando, San Bernardino, Aurora, Virginia Tech, all the way back to Columbine. Though we are united in our grief around this country, we still seem to lack a collective will to address gun violence in a way that isn't paralyzed by partisan politics. So, we can pray endlessly, we can enjoy beautiful renditions of "God Bless America," but it's unlikely to prevent another mass slaughter of people until we, as a society, are committed to do what we can to reduce gun violence, which now averages more than one mass shooting per day.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The massacre in Las Vegas, occurring on the 274<sup>th</sup> day of the year, was the 337<sup>rd</sup> mass shooting of 2017 in the U.S., according to [www.massshootingtracker.org](http://www.massshootingtracker.org).

Honestly, I don't get it. I'm not a gunowner, so for me the Second Amendment is not the most cherished and sacrosanct part of the Constitution and Bill of Rights (I join those who view it historically as a right for states—a constitutional assurance that states could martial their own militias at a time when they were ceding power to a new federal government and military still in the process of forming). Thus, the current arguments that the Second Amendment is intended to protect individual citizens from any restrictions on their right to bear arms isn't particularly persuasive to me, especially when there is a real concern for public safety and social order.

Even basic logic leads me to question if there is any legitimate need or moral justification for an average civilian like Stephen Paddock to own 47 lethal weapons (33 purchased in the past year)—most of which would never be used for hunting, but were solely designed to kill other human beings? Shouldn't the ATF, Homeland Security, or at least local police know about these gun purchases? Is that too much to ask? Why do civilians even need to have weapons of war to use at their disposal? Is there nothing society can do?

If it's solely a debate about freedom, is Paddock's freedom to bear arms more significant than the freedom and safety of thousands of people in his line of fire? Is the Second Amendment so enshrined in our culture and the gun lobby so powerful that we can never attain reasonable accountability and restrictions on gun ownership? In Paddock's case, we can't even blame the usual suspects, because he didn't fit the profile of any dangerous criminal or terrorist, so he was never flagged as a threat to society. So, what does that tell us? That an average man stockpiling lethal weapons is not a potential threat? Or that he can be trusted with such an

arsenal? What makes the average person this trustworthy without any measure of accountability to verify that? Given the numbers who have died from gun violence in this country—staggering compared to anywhere else other than war zones—is there nothing we can do?

Honestly, I'm wondering if it does much good to pray if, as a society, we are unwilling to reckon with our collective responsibility for this carnage. It's not a matter of having faith to cope with a tragedy—many of us have that; it's a matter of possessing faith and then doing something to prevent further harm. That's what wisdom is—learning from past experiences to change our ways for the better. It is faith expressed, not only through grief-stricken prayers, but in meaningful actions that will offer some remedy to save others in the future. Otherwise, it's foolishness to believe that we won't continue to live through more of the same until we are willing to collectively solve this chronic and deadly problem in our society. There must be some wisdom gained from our mourning—some collective resolve from our suffering—or we will bear more sorrows from those who should not, in fact, bear arms.

Much wisdom has been offered over the past few days from all sides of the debate, including an apparent willingness by some lawmakers and the NRA to explore certain restrictions on access to “bump stock” devices (which allow semi-automatic rifles to function as automatic weapons). That's a reasonable beginning, as long as other concerns are in play as well, such as addressing effective background checks, matters related to mental illness, civilian use of military-grade weapons, effective training and licensing of firearms, the glorification of violence in our media and entertainment, and a host of other issues raised by all sides of the gun debate.

Perhaps, as people of faith, we can also examine what Bill Leonard, Dean of Wake Forest Divinity School, wrote about this past week, i.e., the “spirituality of firearms.” Drawing upon James Atwood’s book, *America and Its Guns: A Theological Expose*, Leonard writes:

...for many Americans “the gun is only a thing, but it is a thing of the spirit,” noting, “if one looks to tools of violence for deliverance, one grows to be like those tools.” A gun, [Atwood] warns, can become “less a utilitarian tool than an icon,” which grips devotees in ways that approach “the mystical.”<sup>2</sup>

That’s another part of the problem—how certain things in our lives and culture take on a mystical power, value, and importance that exceed their proper place in anyone’s life. Acquiring a cache of lethal weapons certainly must have shaped Stephen Paddock’s mindset and perspective, even if it wasn’t what triggered him to carry out his sadistic plans. We’ve seen repeatedly what greed does to people—how a preoccupation with money can lead them to make terrible choices and do a lot of harm. We are aware of how an obsession with sex (especially pornography) can distort a person’s outlook and degrade their interactions with others. Tragically, addictions of all types rob people of a quality of life and cripple their ability to make good decisions and live a balanced existence.

Too much of anything will mess with your mind, body, and spirit. When people lack a sense of their spiritual health and wellbeing, they turn to objects to fill the void. Though they can appear normal on the outside, they are often terribly conflicted within and perhaps even dangerous to themselves or others. The objects themselves may not be the cause of people’s problems, but what they represent to the person’s troubled spirit will be; so, wisdom tells us the objects then need to be removed from their environment because obsessions and harmful behaviors are triggered by

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Leonard, “No Atheists at Mass Shootings? Gospel Triage”, *Baptist News Global*, October 5, 2017.

access to that over which they have little or no control. It's a complicated matter, but with real and often deadly effects. That's why something like gun violence must be addressed on so many levels and by many different approaches, because the causes behind it will vary and require sophistication, commitment, and accountability. One remedy doesn't address every concern.

After a week like we've been through, this passage from James is helpful, as this country remains in mourning. It encourages the pursuit of wisdom and a mutually respectful engagement with others, especially when addressing the challenges of life.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth...But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

Spiritual counsel such as this is very relevant to our current stalemate in this country. It makes me believe that how we approach the problem of gun violence in our society may be more significant than what we do about it. Why? because if we can collectively own gun violence as a national problem to remedy, take it out of the hands of political lobbyists and partisan ideologues, and leave it for committed problem-solvers to adequately address, we will more likely discover a multi-dimensional and mutually beneficial approach to lessen the violence. It will take the breadth of knowledge and experience across the spectrum to address all the variables and factors that contribute to making this such a perplexing scourge upon our society.

With that, we must remember that as Americans every freedom we possess comes a responsibility to make it a blessing instead of a curse upon

others. Our constitutional freedoms are not a license we are granted without responsibility or accountability; rather, they are to liberate us from unnecessary burdens from which we collectively suffer as a country, as our Founders intended. They were to be exercised with wisdom all the time. When we are spiritually free we are committed to the welfare of all, not just our selfish interests and personal ambitions. When we are spiritually free, we are motivated by the love of others to help guide our moral sensibilities to do what is right.

Let me close by returning to Bill Leonard's piece, where he proposes a few things people of faith can do to contribute toward that end in relation to gun violence. He presents it using the terminology of "spiritual triage", which is where you and I find ourselves this week as citizens of this nation. What he suggests is helpful:

Does the gospel offer an alternative spirituality? If so, then such gospel triage might involve:

- ❖ Developing caregiving strategies for responding to individuals and families who encounter the trauma of gun violence directly — if not first, then second responders.
- ❖ Working toward additional firearm-related safety legislation like expanded background checks, and restrictions on sale of semi-automatic firearms.
- ❖ Helping individuals learn to live in a culture where firearm violence is an ever-present reality.
- ❖ Affirming, renewing and re-forming the Jesus Story as an alternative to the spirituality of firearms, and a resource fostering spiritual enrichment and communal engagement inside and outside the church.
- ❖ Compassionately addressing the spoken and unspoken fears at the heart of the human condition, fears that may contribute to firearm-related obsessions.

His is part of the overall wisdom emerging from a week of terrible mourning in America. It is one voice among many, including those of us within this room. It is our faith that recognizes the suffering of this society is not reflective of the realm that Jesus envisioned or to which we are committed by faith to help realize. So, we take our faith and apply it to

action, addressing in whatever way we feel inspired to address the range of concerns that can help bring an end to gun violence.

It is our task to serve the world in the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. It is our mission to bring healing and wellness to the wounded and suffering, and justice and mercy to those unfairly treated, and love and compassion to all we meet, that we will sow the seeds of peace and right relations which God will nurture and bless until all are made whole—until all is made well.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes  
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT  
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