

# THE EXPLANATION OF MASS MURDER

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On December 14, 2012, in a small town in Connecticut, a 20-year-old young man named Adam Lanza woke up and used his mother's gun to kill her. Then he got in her Honda and drove to a local elementary school, where, with a semi-automatic gun that shot six bullets per second, he killed six adults, 20 innocent children, and then himself.

Without thinking, we could all name other mass murders. On April 2, 1999, 13 were killed and 21 injured at Columbine High School. On April 16, 2007, 32 were killed and 17 were wounded at Virginia Tech. On July 20, 2012, 12 were killed and 58 wounded in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado. Now to those add December 14, 2012, when 27 were killed and two were injured at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. That's only the beginning. The list is long. One website lists the top mass murders worldwide. The list contained 1261 cases.

When we hear of mass murder, our first question is, "What happened?" We want details. How many were killed? Who did it? What happened to the shooter? When we get past those basic questions, we want to know other things. Why did he do it? What causes people to do these kinds of things? How can these kinds of things be prevented?

I want to address those questions, but before I do, I would like to add a personal word. When I heard about the slaughter of innocent children in Connecticut, I cried. I felt for the people who have survived and for the people who are suffering from gunshot wounds. Then I got angry. Most of the victims were innocent children, as young six and seven years old. This happened at Christmas time. How much more despicable could it get?

I want to address these questions, but not as a pastor. If I were talking to people who were directly involved, I would approach this subject differently. I would love them, listen to them, and hug them. Then, I would pray with them and read Scripture to them.

I'd like to address these questions as a Bible teacher. What does the Bible say is the explanation for mass murder? Here are some possible explanations.

(The US Bureau of Justice Statistics defines a mass murderer as "one who murders four or more victims at one location, within one event.")

## **Social**

*The Suggestion* When I heard about the shooting at Sandy Hook, I turned on the TV to get the details. One of the first things I heard was a pundit talking about the deterioration of society in America as at least a partial explanation of the causes of these kinds of hideous events. Is there a social element to mass murder? There can be a social environment that contributes to mass murder.

*The Scripture* The Bible is very clear that in the last days, violence will increase because lawlessness will abound. In Matthew 24, Jesus describes what will happen during the Tribulation. Here is what He says: "Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will

rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold” (Mt. 24:9-12).

Notice He says that saints during the period will be hated “by all nations” (Mt. 24:9). This is clearly a social phenomenon. He also says, “They will kill you” (Mt. 24:9). As a result of hatred, there will be the mass murder of believers. This will be a hate crime.

The principle is stated in verse 12: “Because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.” Lawlessness abounding socially will cause the love of many to grow cold individually. To say the same thing another way, as lawlessness increases, love will decrease. As sin increases, sensitivity to other people decreases.

I do not have to labor the point that the moral fiber of America is deteriorating. The breakdown of the family and the increase of illegal drug use are contributing factors. So are TV, violent video games, and the Internet. You can’t pump one murder right after another into the mind without it affecting our sensitivity to one another. Incessant exposure to violence affects us. If Incessant exposure did not affect us, there would be no TV commercials!

The social environment may contribute to someone becoming a mass murderer, but obviously, it’s not the whole answer, or more of us would be mass murderers.

## Psychological

*The Suggestion* The most common explanation of the cause of mass murder is psychological. Psychologists and psychiatrists speak about a chemical imbalance in the brain, mental illness, or personality disorder. What is the profile of the Connecticut shooter? At this point, only a little is known.

Adam Lanza was smart. Joshua Milas, who knew him, said, “He was probably one of the smartest kids I know. He was probably a genius.” In the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades, he corrected people’s Latin papers. He made the honor roll with the highest honors.

One fellow student who hung out with Lanza in High school said that he was a good kid, who was a generally happy person. Yet acquaintances describe Adam as smart, but shy, remote, odd, and a loner. Some who knew him as a student said he was very nervous around people. “He was very different and very shy and didn’t make an effort to interact with anybody.” A student who knew him in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade said, “He always came to school toting a briefcase and wearing his shirt buttoned all the way up.” She added, “It was almost painful to have a conversation with him because he felt so uncomfortable.”

When people approached Lanza in the hallways, he would press himself against the wall or walk in a different direction, clutching his black briefcase like an 8-year-old who refuses to give up his teddy bear. Sometimes he would totally withdraw from whatever he was supposed to be doing at school.

It has been reported that Lanza had Asperger’s syndrome, a mild form of autism. Those who have this problem are often brilliant but socially inept.

Psychologists say that mass murderers often blend in with society, but they tend to be quiet, loners, and insensitive to people who see an injustice where none exists.

*The Scripture* The Bible is not a book on psychology, nor does it psychoanalyze people, but it does recognize that some people have “corrupt minds” (1 Tim. 6:5). The Greek word translated “corrupt” means “to destroy utterly” and in the moral sense, “to corrupt, deprave.” Their corrupt mind does not function normally. It’s not exactly what

psychologists mean by mental illness, but I wonder if there is some overlap between the two concepts.

May I suggest that Lanza was probably angry? After all, he killed his mother. And one report said that he had an “altercation” with four staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School the day before he went on a killing rampage.

The psychological factor may be a factor in producing a mass murderer, but not all loners are mass murderers. The dog has four legs, but not all four-legged animals are dogs.

## Biblical

*Genesis 3* In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and sin entered the world; that is, all people are born with a sin nature. After the Fall of Mankind, what was the first specific sin that was committed? The answer is in Genesis 4. Adam and Eve had two sons, Cain and Abel. Both brought a sacrifice to the Lord, but the Lord respected Abel’s offering and not Cain’s (Gen. 4:3-5). Cain became angry (Gen. 4:5) and killed Abel (Gen. 4:8). In other words, the first specific sin after the disobedience of Adam and Eve was murder!

Actually, this proud man, Cain, was jealous of his brother Abel. His brother had faith and righteousness and God’s approval and Cain didn’t (1 Jn. 3:12). Cain’s jealousy led to hatred. Hatred culminated in anger. Cain was not just upset and angry. He was *very* angry. He was so angry his countenance fell, at least signifying sadness, and perhaps even depression.

The sin nature produces jealousy, hatred, and anger, which leads to murder.

*Matthew 5* In Matthew 5, Jesus also connected anger with murder. He said, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment’” (Mt. 5:21). The expression “you have heard that it was said to those of old” indicates that this is a reference to the oral teachings of various rabbis, not Moses. If He had been referring to Moses, He would have said, “It is written.” So, Jesus is challenging an interpretation of the Old Testament, not the Old Testament. He is talking about the “tradition of the elders,” not Moses; the customary interpretation of the Mosaic Law, not the correct interpretation.

The problem is that the oral tradition of the teachers in Israel was that the act of murder exhausted the meaning of the commandment. According to them, the sixth commandment was restricted to actual homicide. Jesus now clarifies that commandment. He says, “But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment” (Mt. 5:22a). Jesus’ point? Not only is the murderer in danger of judgment, but also the one who is angry without a cause. The way He states all of this is striking. Notice, “Whoever murders will be *in danger of the judgment*” (5:21), and “whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be *in danger of the judgment*” (5:22). By repeating the phrase “in danger of the judgment,” Jesus puts anger without a cause on the same level as murder. Both are in danger of the same punishment. It was not just the act of murder that put a person in danger of judgment, but the attitude of anger, more specifically, being angry without cause toward a brother. Anger leads to murder.

*Matthew 2* One of the saddest things about the shooting in Connecticut was that it happened near Christmas. In Matthew 2, there is another case of innocent children being killed at Christmas. “Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in

Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men” (Mt. 2:16). Note: Herod was exceedingly angry. Herod ordered all the little boys two years old and under in all the “districts” of Bethlehem killed. He had asked the wise men “what time the star appeared” (Mt. 2:7) and calculated Jesus’ probable age.

Since Bethlehem was a small town, the number of children killed has been estimated to be small, from six to thirty (Walvoord) or no more than twenty to thirty (McNeile). Notice, Herod was “exceedingly angry” and that led to mass murder at Christmas, so to speak. Anger may be a factor in mass murder, but not all angry people are mass murderers.

## Theological

*Free Will* The ultimate question is, “Why didn’t God stop this?” If God is all-loving and all-powerful, why did He allow innocent children to be slaughtered? The answer to that question is that God gave all human beings free will. He gave us free will so we could choose to do what is right, so we could choose to love Him and others.

*Evil Chooses* The problem is free moral agents are also free to make evil choices. In trying to analyze mass murderers, there may be a number of forces and factors to be considered, but when all is said and done, people make wicked, sinful, evil choices. Clearly, what Adam Lanza did was evil and profoundly immoral. It was morally reprehensible.

Connecticut Governor Dannel P. Malloy said, “Evil visited this community today.” The next day that quote was the headline on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times*. My brother, who is a licensed therapist in the state of Texas, said of the shooter, “He did not have a mental illness; what he did was premeditated evil.” One TV commentator said, “The children were expecting Santa Claus and the devil showed up.”

To eliminate the possibility of evil, the possibility of choice would have to be eliminated. That would make us robots or computers. Then our complaint would be that God didn’t give us a choice; He just made us machines that He could manipulate.

**Summary:** There may be social and psychological influences involved in a man committing mass murder, but the bottom-line reason men commit mass murder is that they make evil choices.

Some will use this kind of tragedy to argue that there is no God. This does not prove that there no God. It proves that people are sinful creatures who make evil choices.

A man went to a barbershop to have his hair cut and his beard trimmed. As the barber began to work, they began to have a good conversation. They talked about many things and various subjects. When they eventually touched on the subject of God, the barber said, “I don’t believe that God exists.” “Why do you say that?” asked the customer.

“Well, you just have to go out in the street to realize that God doesn’t exist. Tell me, if God exists, would there be so many sick people? Would there be abandoned children? If God existed, there would be neither suffering nor pain. I can’t imagine a loving God who would allow all of these things.”

The customer thought for a moment but didn’t respond because he didn’t want to start an argument.

The barber finished his job and the customer left the shop. Just after he left the barbershop, he saw a man in the street with long, stringy, dirty hair and an untrimmed beard. He looked dirty and unkempt. The customer turned back and entered the barbershop again and he said to the barber:

“You know what? Barbers do not exist.”

“How can you say that?” asked the surprised barber. “I am here, and I am a barber. And I just worked on you!”

“No!” the customer exclaimed. “Barbers don’t exist because if they did, there would be no people with dirty long hair and untrimmed beards, like that man outside.” “Ah, but barbers DO exist! That’s what happens when people do not come to me.” “Exactly!” affirmed the customer. “That’s the point! God, too, DOES exist! That’s what happens when people do not go to Him and don’t look to Him for help. That’s why there’s so much pain and suffering in the world.”