



A weekly resource to spark biblically-centered conversations with your kids about the issues they face in today's youth culture.

SAFETYISM BY: Mike Terry, CPYU Research Fellow and Student Pastor at Parkside Green, Uniontown, OH

In his timeless book *Orthodoxy*, G.K. Chesterton once wisely quipped that the modern world is “full of wild and wasted virtues.” His point was that one of the characteristic features of our post-enlightenment culture is its tendency to take a genuine good and idolize it in our lives and in our society, making the single good the only good. The good of safety is one such of these “wild and wasted virtues” in our culture today - and it is directly affecting parents and teens.

What is Happening?

- In the 1900s, lawmakers and community leaders began to focus on creating more physical safety due to high crime rates, unsafe working environments, etc. However, as Peter Leithart notes, this concern with physical safety grew into an obsession with emotional and mental safety as well.² Thus, a genuine concern for physical safety turned into *safetyism*, which is the *ideological* bent toward ensuring that no one - especially young people - should ever have to face emotional, physical, or mental risk or harm. Examples of this anxious safetyism flood our culture today: the rise of helicopter parenting, the online censoring of certain viewpoints, the proliferation of “safe spaces” on university campuses, and more.
- According to Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt in their important book *The Coddling of the American Mind*, this has all led to one of the great “untruths” permeating our culture today; namely, “The untruth of fragility” or “Whatever doesn’t kill you makes you weaker.”³ As a pastor to students, *I see this all the time*. Students are increasingly anxious because when they encounter any kind of threat - stress from school, conflict in a relationship, pressure to perform from parents - they do not view it as a means to grow into the person God is calling them to be, but as an opportunity to escape into a perceived sense of “safety” that only creates more fear and anxiety.
- Matt Richtel of the *New York Times* reports on this rise of fear and anxiety when he writes: *In 2019, 13 percent of adolescents reported having a major depressive episode, a 60 percent increase from 2007. Emergency room visits by children and adolescents in that period also rose sharply for anxiety, mood disorders and self-harm. And for people ages 10 to 24, suicide rates, stable from 2000 to 2007, leaped nearly 60 percent by 2018, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*⁴
- While I want to avoid oversimplifying this historic rise in mental health struggles in young people today by suggesting that the ideology of *safetyism* is the only cause, it clearly plays a significant role. Researcher Jean Twenge agrees with this when she writes that young people today are “physically safer than ever, yet they are more mentally vulnerable.”⁵



¹ Chesterton, G.K.. “The Suicide of Thought.” *Orthodoxy*, Broadman & Holman Pub, S.I., 2022.

² Leithart, Peter. “Safetyism Is Unsafe.” *Theopolis Institute*, theopolisinstitute.com/leithart_post/safetyism-is-unsafe/

³ Staff, ERLC, et al. “Book Review: The Coddling of the American Mind.” ERLC, 11 June 2020, erlc.com/resource-library/book-reviews/book-review-the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/.

⁴ Richtel, Matt, and Annie Flanagan. “It’s Life or Death’: The Mental Health Crisis among U.S. Teens.” *The New York Times*, 24 Apr. 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/health/mental-health-crisis-teens.html.

⁵ Leithart. “Safetyism Is Unsafe.”



WORD

What Does God's Word Say?

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes: "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame" (Romans 5:3-5). What Paul knew and remembered, and what we are increasingly forgetting, is that in and under the providence of God, suffering, risk, and hardship can be - and often are! - the very means by which God shapes and molds us into the people He created us to be and calls us to become.

Paul knows that if he can entrust his circumstances to the living God who loves him and cares for him, then he will become, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the kind of person who faces the uncertainties and burdens of this fallen world with hope, peace, steadfastness, and joy. In other words, Paul has a *theology of suffering* that helps him to grasp that difficult circumstances have this unique potential to *make him more like Jesus*.

Paul believed - and all followers of Christ should believe - that to become more like Jesus is infinitely more valuable than temporary safety or risk-avoidance. At the heart of the New Testament is this beautiful and paradoxical idea that we are transformed into the likeness of the *glorified* Christ if we first are willing to pick up our crosses and share in the suffering of the *crucified* Christ (1 Peter 4:16, Matt. 16:24).

In our world's story today, safetyism - or the avoidance of suffering - is one of the ultimate aims. But in the Christian story, suffering is actually the means by which we reach the *real* end of the story, which is *glory*. And this is why it's so important that we disciple the next generation to understand and live into a theology of suffering. A healthy theology of *suffering* is a healthy theology of *glory*, which is our eternal destiny in Christ. Parents, pastors, mentors, and other loving adults must wisely encourage teens today not to avoid *all* risk, *all* suffering, and *all* challenges at *all* costs, but to allow God to use these things to transform their lives unto the glory He has intended for them from the beginning and for eternity.





WALK

“Fear not, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

(Isaiah 41:10)

Conversation Starters and Questions:

Here are some practical principles and steps to take as a family in resisting this culture of safetyism in pursuit of a more robust theology of suffering (and glory!) and faithful obedience to Jesus in our everyday lives:

- Don't first ask "is it worth the risk?" but rather "Is Jesus calling me to this?" When making tough decisions, parents need to help their students begin to see their lives as under the Lordship and call of Jesus Christ. Help your students arrive at a decision not primarily on risk assessment or safety, but on faithfulness to what Jesus is calling your student to do in that moment. This will help shift their paradigm out of "safetyism" and into faithful obedience.
- When your student faces a difficult season full of risks, challenges, and hardship, remind them of the Cross of Christ. In order for students to have a "sticky" faith that lasts and grows into their adult years, you as a parent need to help them develop a robust theology of suffering that will carry them through difficult times in their lives. They need to know that it is precisely in those difficult seasons of life that God is most near and most at work in molding them into the people He is calling them to become so that they might be able to do the work He calls them to do.
- Do hard things with your student! Find a rite of passage or a specific challenge that takes risk and sacrifice to accomplish. Maybe it's a long backpacking trip or learning a new skill or giving up time to serve together as a family - whatever it is, create the intentional time and space where your student has to wrestle with hard things in light of their faith.
- Model a healthy theology of suffering in your own life. Most importantly, take an honest assessment of how you as a parent respond to difficulties and hardships. How do you make decisions when there are serious risks involved? Are you making decisions in your own life based on fear for what the future holds or are you seeking and trusting God's will in every moment? How you model this theology of suffering as a parent will have deep lasting impact on the spiritual development of your student.
- God doesn't remove us from the risk and difficulty of life but promises His presence in the midst of it. It isn't that God doesn't care about our safety, He certainly does. In fact, He cares infinitely more about our safety than even we do precisely because He cares about our eternal safety in Him. If our obsession with physical, mental, or emotional safety ever stands in the way of our spiritual growth toward glory in Jesus, then we know we have made safety, in the words of Chesterton, a "wild and wasted virtue."

For further reflection: I'm reminded of Mr. Beaver's response to Susan when she nervously asked him if Aslan the lion was safe:

"Safe?" said Mr Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."⁶

⁶Lewis, C. S., et al. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Harper Trophy, 2003.



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