

A P A R E N T ' S
T O
G U I D E

Jordan Peterson

axis

It came from the Internet!

From his heartfelt lectures, to his wild battles with academic leftists, to his enigmatic, all-beef diet ([which is a real thing](#)), YouTuber Jordan Peterson has captivated the minds of millions across the world, in person and online. He has especially drawn the notice of younger men with his mythological, scientific approach to moral life, so much so that Christian thinkers and leaders have struggled to understand the meaning of his rise to internet stardom.

Responses to the Peterson phenomenon have been numerous and irreconcilable. Some call him [a new conservative prophet](#), others [a woman-hating prig](#). Still others call him an apologist for [white supremacy and heteronormativity](#). Still others call him [a hero](#) of classical liberalism and champion of free speech and the open exchange of ideas. He's even been called [the high priest of our secular age](#). There has been so much talk about Peterson that it can be difficult to see through to the man himself and to know how to react if and when our teens become interested in the things he has to say.

In this guide, we'll get to know Jordan Peterson, as well as summarize and critique a few branches of his thinking from a Christian perspective. Our goal is to give you a deeper understanding of his thought, so that you can discuss him intelligently with your teenagers. We have based our judgments mainly on what he himself has said—no hearsay or partial commentary has been allowed in. **Full disclosure up front:** Overall, we think the guy is not a monster. He has some decent things to say about ethics, politics, and psychology. And he is an excellent speaker. But in the end, his doctrines fall far short of the world-altering truth of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

— Who is Jordan Peterson?

Dr. Jordan B. Peterson was born in the small Canadian town of [Fairview, Alberta](#) in 1962. In case you're not up on your Canadian geography, this area is what some would call the "boondocks" or "boonies." The population today is around 2,000. Peterson speaks with a Canadian accent in a voice that many have [compared to the voice of Kermit the Frog](#). What allowed this high-voiced, country-bred Canadian to rise from such humble beginnings is simply that he is incredibly, incredibly smart.

Professionally speaking, Peterson is an enviably productive psychologist working at the University of Toronto. He has taught at Harvard and published hundreds of scientific papers. He gained respect in the field of the psychology of religion when he published a fat book called [Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief](#) in 1999. *Maps of Meaning* is a scientific and philosophical study of how and why people over the centuries have used myths and religious stories to make sense of life. And it's a real drag to read. The chapters are long, the writing is technical and digressive, and the arguments are hard to follow. The odds that your kid becomes enough of a Peterson fanatic to read *MoM* are quite low. Nevertheless, most of Peterson's popular work, especially that which pertains to us Christians, is based on this book.

Peterson's other scholarly work focuses on diverse issues in the field of psychology: the psychology of totalitarian regimes, the psychology of social aggression, how psychological testing can identify potential entrepreneurs and leaders. He also ran a clinical counseling practice for many years and has joined with two other psychologists to create the [Self Authoring Suite](#), an online program that helps people write out the story of their lives in order to make sense of their future. By all accounts, the program really helps people.

Peterson's professional experience and scholarly research have made him virtually engineered to dispense moral and practical advice. There are Youtube videos of him addressing an astounding range of questions. "[How can I manage my time better?](#)" "[What should I look for in a romantic partner?](#)" "[How should I raise children?](#)" "[How can I raise my grades?](#)" "[How can I manage anxiety and depression?](#)" Just this sampling shows how easy it is to fall down a Peterson rabbit hole.

Peterson's rural background and academic prestige also enhance his authority on all matters ethical and existential, since western people have always trusted "self-made men" who have overcome tough circumstances through their own wit and guile (think Ben Franklin, Abraham Lincoln, and Jay-Z). Moreover, because most of the authoritative voices on the left side of the political spectrum come from or are informed by the academic elite, Peterson's credentials as an academic come as a great relief to those who feel talked down to by liberals and leftists. So while all of this information is important for understanding the man, it's important to know that he spent decades doing the above-mentioned work without receiving much attention from anyone outside the academy

— How did he get (in)famous?

Everything changed in September 2016. Peterson's name became widely known when he posted [a series of YouTube lectures](#) against [Bill C-16](#), a piece of legislation proposed in and passed by the Parliament of Canada that declares the right to be called by one's preferred pronouns to be protected under the *Canadian Human Rights Act*. It makes discrimination on the basis of gender identity or expression a crime.

According to Peterson, the bill dramatically extends the power of the state by legislating what a person can or cannot say. In his lecture, Peterson spoke out about the dangers of rampant political correctness. He did not necessarily say that transgender people should not be called by their desired pronouns, but he objected to the idea of threatening people with that viewpoint with legal action. Of the definitions of "gender identity" and "gender expression" in the bill, he said:

I think it's nonsensical. I think the formulation is absurd. I think it has no scientific standing. I think it's ideologically motivated. I think it's divisive. I think it's dangerous, it causes chaos, it confuses people. There's no upside to it. And for every one person that this potential transformation of legislation frees from oppression, it's going to deathly confuse a hundred more (39:14ff).

As you might expect, these lectures brought many cheers and jeers, much agreement and much objection. Ironically, many people on both sides of the issue misheard Peterson. Folks on the left shouted, "Fascist!" while folks on the right shouted, "Finally, someone who thinks this pronoun stuff is garbage!" But Peterson *will* call a transgender person by preferred pronouns, if he judges their motives to be non-ideological. Though it is popular to do so, no one should solely identify Peterson with the right side of the political spectrum.

Importantly, the Bill C-16 lectures were posted on YouTube. That platform has been the main medium through which Peterson has earned his notoriety, and if our kids come into contact with him, it will most likely happen there. In January 2018, Peterson's fame spiked again when he was [interviewed by journalist Cathy Newman](#) about his new book [12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos](#). Newman conducted the interview in a hostile manner, constantly trying to attribute to

Peterson views that he did not hold. 17 times in the 30-minute video, Newman used the phrase, "So you're saying," before twisting Peterson's words into a caricature of conservatism. Again, Peterson came out looking like a champion of free speech and open debate in the face of politically correct, virtue-signalling liberal society.

Thanks to these and other climactic moments in the public eye, Peterson's YouTube channel has earned millions of subscribers, and his book *12 Rules* has sold millions of copies worldwide. His notoriety and great ability as a public speaker have earned him invitations to international news and debate shows, the meetings of various conferences and societies, and even [convocation at Liberty University](#), a conservative Christian school.

People have found in Peterson not simply a defender of open debate and reason, but also a sage with a deep knowledge of science, mythology, and philosophy. The bulk of the videos on Peterson's YouTube channel are recorded lectures from his courses. More than half of these courses are devoted to teasing out the "psychological significance" of biblical stories, fairy tales, ancient myths, and other narrative productions. Though people come to know Peterson's name through his political activities, they come to love Peterson through his teachings on morality, religion, and psychology.

— Why is he so popular?

One reason people are willing to listen Peterson is that he gives them courage. Many of Peterson's followers feel beaten down by the political left. As [Jonathan Haidt has pointed out](#), university faculty, especially in the humanities and social sciences, are overwhelmingly progressive in their politics. This monoculture has allowed many people on the left to hold their views sloppily, as unquestionable orthodoxies. Not surprisingly, college-aged males, who stand closest to the source of leftist, elitist activism on university campuses, and who believe they would lose the most if leftist visions were realized, are very dismayed at and discouraged by this development. Peterson stands up to the leftists, offering an equally intellectual, alternate worldview, and his willingness to do so can be exceptionally encouraging.

But Peterson's audience's need for encouragement comes from a much deeper place than politics. Peterson himself often marvels at how little encouragement people need to get going in life and how little encouragement people actually get. He talks about the many people who credit him with saving their lives, relationships, and careers, a topic which consistently [makes him cry](#). Anyone with a heart knows that much of modern life is grievously discouraging, disheartening, disappointing, depressing—indeed, so much of our discourse is antagonistic, so much of our entertainment is vapid, so much of our education is negative about human nature. People love Peterson because his message—though not entirely positive—at the very least promises that, with effort, meaning in life is within our grasp.

So, boys (and some girls) who discover Peterson often feel they have discovered a brand new world of knowledge and power. This man with great wisdom, who contradicts the voices in the culture that discourage them, offers them a way to realize their potential. [A letter](#) from an admiring male fan says it all: "At least for me, the lecture series feels analogous to the scenes in fantasy stories and myths where the young hero learns that magic is real, and exists within him." Peterson is their Gandalf, their Obi-Wan, their Dumbledore.

— What are his views on gender?

Another reason Peterson gets so much attention, specifically from young men, is that he affirms instincts that culture has traditionally [attributed to males](#): competition, drive, aggression, power, and so on. He speaks of an ongoing [cultural assault on masculinity](#). Young men are told not to compete, to swallow their aggression rather than to channel it productively, to be more “nice” than “dangerous” in the marketplace and the public sphere. Peterson's advice to “unleash the beast within”—for the good—has made him a hero among conservatives and a thorn in the side of progressives.

Peterson bases most of his views on gender on [psychological statistics](#) and a metanarrative of macroevolution. Male and female animals have evolved differently in response to environmental factors, so that, generally, males are more aggressive and assertive while females are more agreeable and compassionate. Human females tend to be better empathizers because they have been shaped by evolution to care for infants from puberty to menopause. As a result, women naturally tend to choose more person-centered professions, which require empathy, and are more choosy about who they have sex with, since sex, in principle, has greater consequences for them. Human males, on the other hand, tend to be more interested in object-oriented professions, such as STEM professions, because they have been shaped by evolution to fight predators and hunt prey. They are also more sexually active because evolution has designed them to impregnate as many women as possible. Peterson recognizes that there can be and often are exceptions to these general trends, but he nevertheless speaks most often to the majority of people and believes policy should take these generalities into account. It's also important to note that he promotes the integration of both masculine and feminine characteristics in mature people. Men should be able to cry, and women should be able to stand up for themselves.

According to Peterson, postmodern neo-marxists (what he terms “social justice warriors”) have argued that gender is a cultural construct independent of sex—i.e. “I may have certain genitals that make me biologically male, but what it means to be man, what pressure I experience to act like a man, is defined not by nature but by culture.” Gender is an idea used to control bodies. Therefore, so the left argues, gender roles and identities, being human-made, can be molded and changed as we see fit. And because the world is ravaged by competition, aggression, and power, what the world needs right now is less manliness or [a new interpretation of manliness](#) that screens out these destructive impulses.

Peterson replies that, contrary to popular opinion, gender is very much determined by sex for the overwhelming majority of people. The idea that gender is clay in our hands is absurd. What gives us our gender is billions of years old, hardwired into DNA. Trying to change gender is impossible and futile. It would be wiser for us to accept the differences between men and women as givens, and work from there.

— How should Christians understand his views on gender?

So far as we are concerned, Christians are free to agree or disagree with Peterson when it comes to explaining the differences between men and women. But they should proceed with caution. Peterson's arguments against the idea that gender is socially constructed can

help us escape extreme perspectives and combat some of the [harmful excesses of activist transgenderism](#). But to go too far in the other direction would cause just as much harm.

The biggest problem with Peterson's views on gender, from a Christian perspective, is that he assumes that what is natural is what is good, that current reality affirms the way things are supposed to be. Peterson sometimes points out that gender differences arise from biology, concluding that gender cannot be socially constructed, at least not totally. So far, Christians might agree. But Peterson sometimes proceeds to affirm "natural" gender differences as good. This last step assumes too much. Christians recognize that [Adam's fall wrecked all things](#), including human DNA. We live in a fallen world, and we are a fallen race whose original glory is largely—but not entirely—effaced.

Therefore, "*it is natural*" is not sufficient reason for us to say "*it is just*," since we are all, in some deep sense, natural sinners. Maleness itself is broken, and so is femaleness. For one to say, "I have to be sexually aggressive, it's natural for me as a man," is not a sufficient justification from a Christian perspective. For aggression to be sanctioned, we need to be able to prove that aggression is commended in certain circumstances by Jesus Christ. And if we can't do that, we have to say that what is natural for men is worthy of our opposition and reformation. To make the point clearer, Christians aren't called to live according to the old order but the new way of Jesus. The Kingdom of God has been introduced into the world through the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In so doing, He has shown us new social constructs, new relational constructs, and new ways of being even in the midst of the old order.

— What is his moral message?

The central thrust of Peterson's moral wisdom is that taking on responsibility is the key to a meaningful life. But he begins with the idea that life is suffering. Life is full of pain, unpredictability, unfairness. People treat each other and themselves horribly. There are several possible reactions to this.

- First, we could become resentful and pout about how much evil there is and how much wrong has been done to us and how much we suck. Peterson usually responds by saying that resentment only makes things worse for everyone. Plus, to become resentful, you have to ignore the amazing gifts that modern society has given us, which should make us overwhelmingly grateful.
- Second, we could avoid the suffering by chasing short-term pleasures: pornography, alcohol, food, video games—you name it. Again, Peterson responds by saying that this solution generally makes things worse, especially over the long haul. College students [tend to opt](#) for some combination of these first two responses: They become social justice warriors and/or party animals.
- Third, we could respond to the fact that life is suffering by taking responsibility for ourselves and for others, walking toward and not away from the suffering, trying to make things a little bit better. We should be determined to improve because we can. This, according to Peterson, is "[the oldest story of mankind: Get yourself together](#)."

One extension of Peterson's commitment to responsibility is that he advises young men to work hard, find a wife, and have children. He believes, based on sociological studies, that monogamous, child-bearing, male-female relationships are civilization's best hope for moving

forward without collapsing. Families are also, he argues, the surest way to feeling fulfilled in life. Having children is certainly not easy, but caring for them is a challenge [that makes life meaningful](#).

Obviously, Peterson's message to take responsibility flies in the face of his opponents' message of victimhood and vindication. For Peterson's opponents, what determines the outcome of your life is outside of you: laws, systems, structures, culture, history. But Peterson argues that what determines the outcome of your life is inside of you: your values, will, drive, grit, honesty, etc. For him, believing that the world can be divided into two classes, oppressors and oppressed, depletes people's resources for taking constructive action. Better to assume that everyone is oppressed, not simply by people but by life itself, and then tell each person, "Now *do* something about it!"

— How should Christians understand his moral message?

As Paul says in his first epistle to the Thessalonians, Christians should ["test all things" and "hold fast to what is good."](#) There is much with which Christians can agree in Peterson's pronouncements. Nevertheless, his overall approach to moral life is antithetical to Christian teaching—profoundly so. That people think his teaching is consonant with biblical morality shows that Christians are too quick to identify Christianity with family values (though of course we love the family!), individualism (though of course we care about individual rights!), and the so-called "protestant" work ethic (though we still work hard!). It also shows that Christians haven't yet understood the true grandeur of the Gospel. Peterson's message diverges from Christian teaching on two counts especially: It misunderstands justice, and it forgets God's grace. Both of these ideas have filled whole library shelves! So we'll have to touch on them quickly here.

Peterson misunderstands justice in two ways. First, he overemphasizes individual responsibility. To be sure, the Bible teaches that everyone is a sinner, that we should test ourselves before judging others, that sinners are specially responsible for their own failures, and that each person's eternal destiny is in some sense a result of their personal choice. But the Bible also affirms that [we are corporately responsible](#) for the sins of other people—for example, [the sins of our forefathers](#). See [Daniel 9](#), where Daniel prays repentance for the sins of his people, past and present. Or see [Romans 5](#), where Paul teaches that we share in the sin of Adam, just as we share in the victory of Christ.

The individual and social aspects of justice must be held in tension, because the word of God holds them in tension. Peterson fails to do that. When he [argues](#) that "the idea that you can target an ethnic group [white people] with a collective crime, regardless of the specific innocence or guilt of the constituent elements of that group," is racist, not biblical, Christians must cautiously disagree. We certainly would not want to attribute corporate guilt flippantly or pridefully, but we must recognize that God does hold individuals accountable for group failures, even to the point of convicting the whole human race for the sin of one man.

Second, Peterson is wrong to abandon the concepts of oppressor and oppressed in social analysis. God's Word [frequently speaks about](#) oppressors and the oppressed as distinct and identifiable groups of people, and [calls on those with power](#) to stand up for the downtrodden.

Peterson claims to do justice to the Bible, but in fact he selectively reads what the Bible has to say about justice. He also fails to account for systems of oppression that are inherently built into the very fabric of society which show up in education, government, the workplace, and even in our churches. His opponents on the left are not wrong to use the concepts of oppressors and the oppressed when they read our social landscape. Rather, they go wrong in allowing that lense to dominate their thinking. The Bible presents a complex vision of justice, one that we cannot risk simplifying.

To be sure, Peterson's ideas about how to help people who are down and out can fit within the Bible's framework of helping the downtrodden. It is not good, for example, to teach victims of oppression to wallow in their victim status, as some have done. But it is historically and biblically untrue to say that no one has a rightful claim to victim status today. And, for example, telling the poor and working class to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, work harder, and take sole responsibility for their poverty, is unchristian. As Tim Keller [once said](#), "If Jesus had said that to you, you'd be in Hell" (19:40).

More importantly, Peterson's account of moral life forgets God's grace. Grace plays no role in Peterson's moral teaching. In fact, his calls to try harder, do better, and work more is the religious mantra of fallen humanity in a nutshell.

Christ is the *antidote* to "trying harder." We follow a Man who said, "[I am the vine](#), you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is who bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." As we'll discuss below, Dr. Peterson does not believe that God exists as an independent, spiritual being who interacts with humankind. For him, God is at best a projection of what we think goodness is. Therefore, all Peterson can say to people is "pull yourself together" and "take responsibility." Christians, on the other hand, believe in grace, which [Dallas Willard aptly defines](#) as "God acting in our lives to bring about what we do not deserve and accomplish what we cannot do on our own." Or as [Paul says](#), "It is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

These two understandings of moral life could not be more different. The failure to mention grace would be a problem even if all of Peterson's moral advice adhered to Christian principles, because grace has less to do with what the rules are and more to do with *whose strength we rely on to keep the rules* and *what vision of the good life the rules are leading us toward*. For Dr. Peterson, the answers to those questions are *our own strength* and *the top of a societal dominance hierarchy*. For Christians, the answers are *God's strength* and *to the middle of God's love*.

Finally, Peterson's omission of divine grace leaves no room for forgiveness in his moral system. If you fail, it's on you. If you make it, it's because of your own righteousness. Sounds a lot like the advice Job's friends gave him during his time of pain and suffering. Once again, Peterson-ism, however energizing it may be for a time, is anti-Gospel.

——— What does he say about religion?

Peterson is at his most seductive when he includes expositions of biblical stories in his lectures. He often tells interviewers about the way people snap to attention when he starts explaining, say, the Genesis story. [Peterson himself identifies](#) as a "believer" and actively promotes belief in God, religious practice, and the reading of Scriptures. In short, the man seems to be on board.

But in no sense is he on board. The way Dr. Peterson thinks about the stories of the Bible is drastically different from the way any Christian worthy of the name thinks about them. To understand the difference, we have to understand the thinking of one of Peterson's heroes, the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (pronounced YOONG), who flourished in the early 1900s.

According to Jung (or Peterson's interpretation of Jung), human beings evolved over a very long period of time. During that time, animals survived or died according to the principles of Darwinian natural selection. As the human race began to emerge, the cumulative survival wisdom of the evolutionary past—what we should fear, love, approach, avoid—became deeply encoded in the brain. In humans, the only animals to develop self-consciousness, this deeply encoded evolutionary wisdom manifests itself through dreams, conscious imagination, art, and stories. In other words, the evolutionary history of the human race has endowed us with a [collective unconscious](#), a gathering of story-patterns, images, and archetypes that everyone carries around in their head and that contains the secrets of wise living. In [Jung's words](#), "The collective unconscious comprises in itself the psychic life of our ancestors right back to the earliest beginnings."

For example, in dreams and in the stories we tell, we are prone to imagine evil as dragon-like, reptilian, snake-like, fanged, darkly colored, scaly, and monstrous (think Satan, Grendel from *Beowulf*, and dragons in medieval folklore). This tendency is a result of our million-year struggle for survival in snake-and-crocodile-infested environments. Over time, we came to associate death, evil, uncertainty, fear, and pain with such creatures. In the present day, however, we have separated ourselves from nature. Now we use those associations to help us navigate personal, social, and political life. We can watch a story about a knight slaying a dragon and easily see how it maps onto, say, our battle with the dragon of anxiety or our next job interview. Such stories, according to this view, bubble up from our evolutionary past and are designed to help us make sense of the world.

God, then, is also just another representation of the collective unconscious, according to Peterson. In his series of lectures on the Bible, he says God is the "[spirit of humanity as such](#)," the sum of what makes good people good. Imagine all the amazing people you know or have heard about, then combine their good qualities—the speed of Usain Bolt, the strength of Hercules, the wisdom of Plato, the honesty of Abe Lincoln, the justice of Solomon, the courage of Martin Luther. Take away all the names, but keep the attributes. Now, turn those attributes up to 11. According to Peterson, this is where we get our idea of God. [He explains it like this](#): "There's principles that guide our behavior. What are those principles? If you want the initial answer of what archaic Israelites meant by 'God,' that's something like what they meant." God is "an abstracted ideal" drawn from our experience of powerful people over the centuries, *not* a self-sufficient spiritual being, as Christian tradition holds. For Peterson, God is humanity's invention, not the other way around.

So for Jung and for Peterson, biblical stories are very good representations of the evolutionary wisdom stored in the collective unconscious, but they do not have historical truth value. Rather, [they express](#) "the struggle of humanity to rise above its animal forebears and understand what it means to be human." The stories find their value in their ability to help us lead lives of subjective meaning. They have nothing to do with connecting us to a God who exists outside our skulls.

As you might expect, this understanding of the Bible leads to all kinds of wacky—though sometimes very interesting—interpretations of biblical stories and sayings. [Peterson says](#) that Matthew 7:7 ("Ask, and it shall be given to you") is really Jesus' way of saying that, in life, you are

more likely to accomplish your goals if you specify what those goals are. God is a projection of an ideal way of life deposited in our brains by evolution. So “prayer” is a matter of asking ourselves who we must become to be good. Christians, of course, believe that we should pray, because, as Jesus says a sentence later, “your heavenly Father gives good things to those who ask him.” Prayer is a conversation between distinct entities, not psychological goal-setting.

Obviously, Dr. Peterson's approach to religion is in no way compatible with Christian orthodoxy. Those who find his readings of biblical stories convincing are suffering from one or both of two issues. Either they are woefully biblically illiterate, or their leaders have done a poor job teaching them what the Bible's stories actually mean and how they matter for their lives.

— What should I do if my teenager is listening to him?

As we said at the outset, we don't think Dr. Peterson is a monster, and he certainly has some incredible ideas to ponder. If you discover that your child has an interest in Peterson, there's no reason to panic. Rather, we suggest a strategy of **curiosity**, **compassion**, and **critical discussion**.

Curiosity. Curiosity begins with using what Christian writers Steve Argue and Kara Powell call “[age-matching vocabulary](#).” Rather than speaking down to our teenager, as though they were ten (“I don't want you watching that!”), we should speak to them as competent adults-in-training who can tell us something important. Our kids are not stupid. If they become enamored with a thinker (or a band or a social movement), it's because that thinker seems to be addressing their heartfelt concerns and problems. The person in question can be a key to understanding our teenagers' deepest interests and anxieties. Therefore, our response to our teens' interest in Peterson should begin with three magic words: “Tell me more.” Through curiosity we can come to understand what itches Peterson is scratching. If possible, we should watch, listen to, or read Peterson along with them.

Compassion. Once we learn what needs Peterson is meeting for our teenager, we should spend time cultivating compassion for that need. Rather than becoming defensive or believing that our inadequacies as parents have “led to” their interest, we should move the focus onto our children. What does it feel like to, as the letter from a male fan said, learn that magic is real and exists inside you? What does it feel like to need someone to tell you that? What does it feel like to have someone intelligent contradict the cultural voices that discourage you? Through compassion, we can come to understand our kids and set ourselves up as a viable conversation partner. This is a real step in the process, not a small intermission between curiosity and critical discussion. We should set aside time to imagine life in our teenagers' shoes. Prayer is an amazingly effective means of doing this.

Critical Discussion. After curiosity and compassion have worked their magic, we can turn the corner and discuss the strengths and shortcomings of Peterson-ism with our teens. The analysis above is designed to give you general talking points in discussions of Peterson's ideas. That said, you will want to pay attention to what facets of Peterson's teaching your teenager resonates with most, and show Christ's excellence in that particular area.

More important than these talking points, however, will be your ability to show that the traditional Christian way of approaching life and God *works better* than Peterson's way. Be prepared to explain how this or that Scripture, rightly interpreted, changed your life, helped you

overcome obstacles, or led you to a deeper sense of God's love and power. Peterson's appeal rests mostly in the seeming utility and relevance of his ideas. To show the superiority of Christian truth, we must be able to show the relevance of Christian truth—not relevance in the sense of "coolness," but in the sense of its ability to help us navigate the our world. Teenagers can smell our attempts to make Christianity "cool" from a mile away. But they will respect the stories we tell about how Christ can work tangibly their lives and ours.

Recap

- Dr. Jordan Peterson is a psychologist working at the University of Toronto.
- He became famous when he posted a series of lectures against Bill C-16. Now he is known by some as a champion of free speech and the open exchange of ideas. To others, he is a bigot, or at best he gives a voice to bigoted groups.
- Peterson's popularity stems in part from the fact that he stands up to the orthodoxy of an academy that has become overwhelmingly left-leaning in its politics. He gives his listeners courage when they feel condemned by the left.
- He is also popular because he tells people that meaning in life is within their grasp. People find this very encouraging.
- Peterson argues that gender is determined by sex for most people. He thinks we should write public policy and adopt social mores that take this reality into account.
- Christians should take care not to believe that what is natural is what is good, when it comes to gender, as Peterson sometimes does.
- Peterson's moral message is that taking responsibility is the key to a meaningful life. We should not be resentful for the wrongs done to us, or feel weighed down with guilt for the wrong actions of our ancestors. Rather, we should pull ourselves together and make things better to the best of our ability.
- Peterson's moral message misunderstands God's justice by overemphasizing personal responsibility and by abandoning the categories of oppressor and oppressed in social analysis.
- Christians must recognize that, though personal responsibility is undoubtedly a biblical idea, corporate responsibility is equally present in the scriptures.
- Christians must also recognize that, though it would be a mistake to read everything in our present society under the lens of oppressor and oppressed, those lenses are given to us in the Bible in order to help us walk humbly, live justly, and love mercy.
- Peterson's moral message omits the idea of grace entirely.
- Christians should recognize that Peterson's calls to "pull yourself together" are just another echo of the religious impulse of fallen humanity. The whole point of the gospel is that God, not we, pulls ourselves together.
- Christians should see that Peterson's system has no place for forgiveness.
- Peterson's views on religion, especially on religious stories and scriptures, are heavily influenced by Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious.
- Peterson does not believe in God as a transcendent, spiritual, self-existent deity. Rather,

Peterson believes that God is a projection of the best life that humanity can imagine. To him, the scriptures are simply very good representations of the archetypes of the collective unconscious.

- Christians should see that this thinking about God and about scripture is wildly unorthodox.
- If our teenagers are interested in Peterson, we should respond with curiosity, compassion, and critical discussion.
- More importantly, we should show that the Christian way of reading the Bible and interacting with God works better, leads to more abundant life.

Final Thoughts

It is tempting, and probably not altogether off base, to blame Peterson's ability to draw young Christian men away from the Church on two things. First, there is the anti-intellectualism of much of the Church. Peterson's lectures are often very long and full of difficult material. The fact that many young people are willing to listen to that kind of teaching should show us that we may have underestimated the ability, aptitude, and sheer desire of young people to think deeply. We need to continue to teach young people that they can love God with all their *minds*.

Second, we might blame Peterson's outsized popularity on the inability of many Christians to understand the relevance of Christ's teachings for everyday life. It is impossible to listen to Peterson and not come away with ideas about how abstract concepts like Jung's collective unconscious might change the way you live tomorrow. Can the same be said for our understanding of theology or Scripture? We need to continue to teach young people the life-altering truths of the Gospel in a way that is truly...well, life-altering.

But the Peterson phenomenon is no cause for blamecasting. Christians should rest easy in the face of such popular excitement. History has churned up many Jordan Petersons. Dr. Peterson will have his time in the spotlight, and then the earth will swallow him like it swallowed Freud, Marx, Darwin, and countless others. But Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Whatever else we may gain from these deceased or dying thinkers, we should thank them for sharpening our understanding of what Christ's gospel is—and what it is not. We should thank them for showing—if anything, by way of contrast—the surpassing excellence of Jesus, our only Teacher.

Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [A Parent's Guide to a Doubting Teen](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to the Bible](#)

If you'd like access to all of our digital resources, both current and yet to come, for one low monthly or yearly fee, check out the [All Axis Pass](#)!

Additional Resources

General Information on Peterson

- [Bill C-16 Lecture 1](#)
- [Cathy Newman Interview](#)
- [Peterson's website](#)
- [Self Authoring suite](#)
- [A personality test created by Peterson](#)

Christian Appraisals of the Peterson Phenomenon

- "[How to Understand the Jordan Peterson Phenomenon](#)," The Gospel Coalition
- "[Jordan Peterson and the Evangelical Man](#)," The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood
- "[Book Review: 12 Rules for Life by Jordan Peterson](#)," Mere Orthodoxy
- "[The Voice Evangelical Men Wish They Had](#)," *Fathom Mag*
- "[Jordan Peterson: High Priest for a Secular Age](#)," The Gospel Coalition
- "[Jordan Peterson Is a Prophet—And a Problem for Progressives](#)," Catholic World Report

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