

## **Joining a Gang**

### **By David Feddes**

*My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them (Proverbs 1:10).*

Victor was 13 years old when he joined a gang. Why did he join? “Because,” he says, “I thought I’d be accepted better, and they seemed like family.” Soon Victor was taking part in drive-by shootings. “My friends would call me their ‘little gangster,’” he says. “With the gun I felt like I couldn’t be stopped.”

One day, when Victor was 15, members of a rival gang broke all the windows on his car. Victor tracked some of them down and started talking trash with one of them. “And then I pulled out the gun,” says Victor. “And he said, ‘You ain’t going to shoot me,’ and I just started shooting, because he didn’t think I would. It would have looked stupid if I pulled the gun and then didn’t shoot him. I would have looked dumb.”

Many young people like Victor are joining gangs. Gangs are getting bigger and more powerful in big cities, and in suburbs and smaller towns as well. Why is this? What makes gang life so attractive to so many? Why do people join gangs? One place to learn about the gang mentality is the Bible.

“The Bible?” you might think. “What can a book written so long ago tell us about gangs in today’s world?” Well, the Bible is never out of date—and besides, gangs are nothing new. Already 3,000 years ago, young people were being warned about gangs, as we see in the first chapter of the Bible book of Proverbs.

My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them. If they say, “Come along with us; let’s lie in wait for someone’s blood, let’s waylay some harmless soul... we will get all sorts of valuable things and fill our houses with plunder; throw in your lot with us, and we will share a common purse—my son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths; for their feet rush into sin, they are swift to shed blood... (Proverbs 1:8-19)

Here the Bible shows three things a gang offers: power, money, and friendship. These three things appeal to desires that we all have: power appeals to our desire to be significant, money appeals to our desire to be successful, and friendship appeals to our desire to belong. Let’s look at each of these.

### **Power**

First, the attraction of power. Everybody wants to be significant. Nobody wants to be a nobody. So if you’re feeling small and insignificant, it’s tempting to be offered power—sheer, raw power. It’s tempting when somebody puts a gun in your hand and says, “Come along with us; let’s lie in wait for someone’s blood” (as Proverbs 1:11 puts it). That’s not an easy offer to refuse if you’re starving for significance. What could possibly make you feel more important than literally having someone else’s life wrapped around your trigger finger?

Victor, the young man I mentioned earlier said, “With the gun I felt like I couldn’t be stopped.” Another gang member, Clarence, told a reporter, “[The gun] made me feel macho, like nobody could touch me, like no one’s going to mess with me.”

Michael is another gang banger whose gun made him feel important. A number of years ago Michael fired six bullets into the back of a 17-year-old girl who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Even after he was arrested and convicted of murder, he felt no remorse.

He figured that the killing transformed him from a nobody into a somebody: “I done did something, and I’m known,” he boasted with a smile. “I consider myself public enemy number one.”

A kid may become a gang banger simply because he would rather be a bad somebody than a good nobody. Everybody wants to be significant, to be able to say, “I done did something.” And a gun offers a shortcut to the godlike power of life and death.

### **Money**

A second reason for joining a gang is money. Everybody wants to succeed in life, and success is often measured in terms of money. Some young people, especially in poor communities, see little opportunity to succeed financially, and gangs offer a way to make easy money fast. As the gang says in Proverbs 1:13, “We will get all sorts of valuable things and fill our houses with plunder.” You can make more money stealing cars than parking them. You can make more money selling drugs for a few weeks than flipping burgers for a year. When you’ve got nothing, and you see other people driving cars and flashing cash, and you’ve got the opportunity to join them, it’s hard to say no.

Clarence started dealing dope and carrying guns at age 15. He says, “I wanted to get paid. I thought money was the world. I’d spend it on my girlfriend, or I’d take all my homeboys out. If you made money that day, you’d pay, and that made me feel like I was the big daddy, the big man with the master plan.”

Joining a gang can mean instant money. You’re no long a failure—you’re a success. You’re “the big man with the master plan.”

### **Friendship**

Power appeals to our desire to be significant, money appeals to our desire to be successful, but the third reason for joining a gang may be the most appealing of all: friendship, the chance to belong. In Proverbs 1:14, the gang says, “Throw in your lot with us, and we will share a common purse.” When they say that, they aren’t just talking about sharing money, although that’s part of it. They’re saying, “In our group, it’s all for one and one for all. If you need a place to belong, if you need friends who will look out for you and stick with you, then we’ve got what you’re looking for. Throw in your lot with us.”

According to Victor, that was his main reason for becoming a homeboy. He did it, he says, “because I thought I’d be accepted better, and they seemed like family.” The gang is the only family some people have. When your home life is a mess, why not join a gang? At least then you feel accepted somewhere.

Not all gang members come from broken families. Some have loving parents, but they join gangs anyway, because they’re more eager to be accepted by peers than by their parents. Michael said, “The gang is your family. The more my parents told me to stay away from gangs, the more I wanted to hang out with them.”

### **A Deadly Choice**

Gangs offer a lot. To those starved for significance, the gang offers power over life and death. To those eager for success, the gang offers money. To those desperate to belong and be accepted, the gang offers friendship. No wonder gangs attract so many.

But no matter how strong the attraction, joining a gang is a deadly choice. Proverbs 1 describes the outcome this way: “These men lie in wait for their own blood; they waylay only themselves!” The gang lifestyle is really a “death-style”—all too often it leads to prison or to death by a bullet or an overdose. Worse yet, joining a gang is a big step toward hell, unless there is repentance.

### **Who, Me?**

Maybe you’ve never joined a street gang and you never will. Does that mean you can ignore what I’ve been saying? No, the gang mentality infects almost all of us in one way or another.

Gangs attract young people by offering power, money, and friendship. And even those who don’t actually join a gang can be infected by the gang mentality. The gang mentality infects us whenever we enjoy a feeling of violent power, or chase success through money, or look for acceptance in the wrong places.

Millions of people who never join a gang still love the feeling of violent power. That’s why violent movies and TV shows are so popular. At the movies you identify with a character. You *become* the violent hero. You have a license to kill. You have the power of life and death over others. Violent computer games give you that same feeling, as you blast your enemies to bits. At that point, you’re closer to the gang mentality than you might want to admit. You have the same love of power and violence, though you don’t carry it out in real life.

A second reason we saw for joining a gang is to make some quick money and take a shortcut to success. That’s not just something that happens on the mean streets. It happens on job sites and in offices every day. You may feel uneasy about doing something dishonest, but you figure that if you want to get ahead, you’d better do it. Your conscience may object, but meanwhile the people around you seem to be shouting, like the gang in Proverbs 1, “We will get all sorts of valuable things and fill our houses with plunder—if you do what we say.” Capitalism without a conscience—doing whatever it takes to make money and be successful—has much in common with gang life.

And then there’s the third reason for joining a gang: the need to belong, to be part of a group. We all have a desire to be accepted, to be affirmed by friends. Why do kids in school try so hard to be popular? Why do so many people hang around bars? For much the same reason that others join street gangs. They’re lonely, and they want to be accepted. You may be so desperate for friendship that you’ll take it wherever you can get it—whether with gangs or drinking buddies. If you crave acceptance no matter what, that’s a gang attitude.

### **Overcoming the Gang Mentality**

Fear, despair, and loneliness are a big part of the gang mentality, and we as a society must work to fight the conditions of poverty and injustice and drugs and broken families that often produce these terrible feelings. But that is not enough.

The problem isn’t just social but spiritual. We’ll never overcome the gang mentality until we deal with the desires it appeals to. There’s nothing wrong with wanting to be significant, or wanting to be successful, or wanting to be accepted and loved. Where we go wrong is in trying to meet those needs without God. And that’s a spiritual problem.

Just before Proverbs 1 starts talking about gangs, it says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (v. 7). When you fear the Lord, you take God more seriously than anything else. Then the gang isn’t so appealing. You find God is meeting your needs, including your needs for significance, success, and acceptance.

With God you find that to have *significance*, you don't need a gun or power to harm others. God makes it possible really to be somebody, no matter what your neighborhood is like, no matter how bad your circumstances may be. The Bible teaches that you have been created by God to reflect his image. The Bible also says that when you put your faith in Jesus, you become a child of the King (Romans 8:14-17). You become royalty, and you will reign with Jesus forever and ever (Rev. 22:5). If that doesn't make you feel significant, nothing will!

With God you find in addition that *success* isn't just about money. You become rich in love and good deeds, not in mere money. You want to become everything God wants you to be, not just what other people say you should be. And you look forward to the rewards that God has promised those who love him. That's the only success that really counts, and it lasts forever.

With God you also find that if *acceptance* is what you're looking for, you can do a lot better than just fitting in with gang members or school mates or drinking buddies. You can be accepted by God himself. By faith you can know that Jesus loves you with the greatest love a friend can have: Jesus died for his friends, and now he lives and befriends all who trust him.

When you trust Jesus, he can even turn peer pressure to your advantage. It's doesn't have to be you and Jesus against the whole world. The Lord knows you need other people to accept and support you and hold you accountable, so he's provided a group where you can have friends who want what's best for you. It's a group where, instead of the negative peer pressure to follow Satan into sin and death, you feel positive peer pressure to follow Jesus to abundant life. It's a group called church.

A gang is deadly for you—if it's the wrong kind of gang. But a gang is a great idea if it's the right gang—the gang of those who are following Jesus and encouraging each other, the gang of God's people, the church of Jesus Christ.