

**axis**



**A PARENT'S GUIDE TO**

# **CANCEL CULTURE**



You can do something stupid when you're 15, say one thing and 10 years later that shapes how people perceive you. We all do cringey things and make dumb mistakes and whatever. But social media's existence has brought that into a place where people can take something you did back then and make it who you are now.

— [L, age 16](#) in an interview with *The New York Times*

# A Parent's Guide to **CANCEL CULTURE**

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## You're canceled

*People tend to see cancellation as either wholly good — there are new consequences for saying or doing racist, bigoted or otherwise untenable things — or wholly bad, in that people can lose their reputations and in some cases their jobs, all because a mob has taken undue offense to a clumsy or out-of-context remark. Personally, I think it's best viewed not as either positive or negative, but as something else: a new development in the way that power works — a development brought about by social media. - [Jonah Engel Bromwich, The New York Times](#)*

What if the worst thing you've ever done was filmed, and then shared with millions of people online? What if thousands of strangers judged you based on that snippet of your life? At a time when smartphones can instantly broadcast our worst sins to the world, and when digging through someone's online dirt is as easy as typing a few keywords, the internet can be a strange and frightening place. This is the era of cancel culture, which generally refers to calling people out on social media to suffer punitive consequences for inappropriate behavior or speech. And it's got [many people wondering](#), "Is cancel culture a mob mentality, or a long-overdue way of speaking truth to power?"

## #FireAmyCooper

*She lost her job, her home, and her public life. Now some demand her freedom? How many lives are we going to destroy over misunderstood 60-second videos on social media?*

[That statement](#) was made by Amy Cooper's lawyer, Robert Barnes. You're probably familiar with the [viral video](#) where Ms. Cooper hysterically called a 911 operator after Christian Cooper (unrelated) calmly asked her to leash her dog. She said, "I'm in the Ramble, there is a man, African-American, he has a bicycle helmet and he is recording me and threatening me and my dog." She clarified over and over that this African American man was threatening her, invoking the stereotype that because he's Black, she was in real danger.

The video sparked well-deserved outrage that racial prejudice is still so shamelessly

exploited in 2020. Christian Cooper did nothing wrong, yet Amy's call to the police weaponized his Blackness as she pretended to be at risk.

But how to respond? What does Amy Cooper deserve? How would we want to be treated if one of the worst things we'd done was broadcast for the world to see?

The next day she [was fired](#). Then she lost her home. She publicly apologized, yet people continued to call for her head. Eventually, even Mr. Cooper [said in an interview](#), "I'm uncomfortable defining someone based on a few seconds of what they've done. It was a racist act, but does that define her entire life?"

Many of us echo his question, a query about the effectiveness of cancel culture: To what extent should someone be made to pay for their past? How do we determine what is appropriate to say and do? Should justice primarily be about punishment? How can we hold people, especially powerful and influential people, accountable?

## What does it mean to be canceled?

Getting "canceled" can look like online shaming, losing followers, getting fired, being encouraged to apologize, or even receiving death threats.

There's a long list of people (and companies) who have been canceled over the years: Bill O'Reilly, Madison Beer, Kim Kardashian, Ellen Degeneres, Kanye West, John Crist, Jordan Peterson, [Equinox Fitness](#), J.K. Rowling, [James Charles](#), [Scarlett Johansson](#), Louis C.K., Netflix...the term applies to many situations (sexual abuse scandals, insensitive comments, racist acts, political ideologies). Sometimes cancelation lasts a few weeks. Sometimes it's permanent.

Getting canceled isn't just for celebrities. *The New York Times* [interviewed teens](#) around the country to understand what the term means to Gen Z:

*Alex is 17, and she hears the word 'canceled' every day at her high school outside Atlanta. It can be a joke, but it can also suggest that an offending person won't be tolerated again. Alex thinks of it as a permanent label. 'Now they'll forever be thought of as that action, not for the person they are,' she said.*

Some see cancel culture as necessary accountability, a way to make people take responsibility for the harm they've caused. Others argue that it's a means of censorship. In the US, cancel culture is politicized (by the left and the right),

controversial, and emotionally fraught. Its existence highlights how hard it is to relate well with other humans, especially the humans we don't understand or agree with.

## How did we get here?

- In the 1991 film *New Jack City*, Wesley Snipes' character Nino Brown says about his girlfriend, "Cancel that b\*\*\*\*, I'll buy another one." It's probably [the first time](#) that the term "canceled" involves a person, not a credit card (when cancelation doesn't yet apply to sexist remarks).
- By 2015, "You're canceled" became a way to express both serious and joking disapproval on [Black Twitter](#). Over time, the phrase was used to call celebrities and organizations to account.



- Although many still use the terms interchangeably, some argue that **cancel culture** and **call-out culture** then become distinct movements. Call-out culture uses social media to point out a problem; cancel culture goes further, advocating for real-life consequences, calling for the job, fame, or reputation of the accused offender.
- Then, with the global pandemic and lockdown, it seemed like someone new was

getting canceled every other week, or trying to cancel someone in response to being canceled (and if you're confused, don't worry, everyone is confused).



- [Michael Barbaro explains](#), “As the world moves even more online during the pandemic, greater attention and weight is being given to the things that happen there.” Complex, nuanced opinions held by multifaceted, embodied people are exchanged on platforms that reward certainty, simplicity, and outrage. Rather than seeing the person on the other end of the discussion as a complete human being with insecurities and idiosyncrasies, they are reduced to a defeatable party who must be proven wrong. This has always been a hazard of social media, but heightened emotional rawness from isolation, stress, and uncertainty made the stakes feel higher and the frenzy more palpable.

So here we are, in what feels like a more polarized environment than ever, trying to decide what is appropriate to say and do, and what consequences people should face when they cross the lines that we draw.

## What's the goal of cancel culture?

*You may have your opinions, entitled to your opinions  
But really am I supposed to go to jail or lose my career because of your opinion?*

*Yeah, go ahead and stone me, point your finger at me  
Turn the world against me, but only God can mute me.*

— An excerpt from [R. Kelly's 19-minute song](#) responding to the #MuteRKelly movement that sprung from two decades of allegations that he sexually exploited minors.

Cancel culture attempts to correct the longstanding problem that with enough wealth, scandals disappear, victims stay quiet, and abuse continues. The #MeToo movement highlighted how commonplace sexual harassment is, and how rarely perpetrators are prosecuted. This is why cancel culture's goal of holding people, especially powerful and influential people, accountable, is well intentioned. If the law doesn't bring about justice, public scrutiny can still make things happen.

Anne Charity Hudley, the chair of linguistics of African America for the University of California Santa Barbara, [explains why](#) cancel culture is an important tool for minorities:

*If you don't have the ability to stop something through political means, what you can do is refuse to participate. Canceling is a way to acknowledge that you don't have to have the power to change structural inequality...But as an individual, you can still have power beyond measure. When you see people canceling Kanye, canceling other people, it's a collective way of saying, 'We elevated your social status, your economic prowess, [and] we're not going to pay attention to you in the way that we once did...'I may have no power, but the power I have is to [ignore] you.'*

Cancel culture affirms that ideas have consequences. Ideologies don't stay in ivory towers. They get walked out, to the benefit or detriment of individuals and society. So the words we use and the policies we promote do matter, and we are responsible for the ideas and actions that we put out in the world.

## What's concerning about cancel culture?

But here's the catch, when we call for someone to be canceled, what are we accomplishing? Does canceling someone provide true justice? As mentioned earlier, it's hard to make sweeping statements about cancel culture because so many people have been canceled for very different offenses (Bill O'Reilly's firing based on [sexual harassment charges](#) is different than [Kanye getting canceled](#) for saying that slavery was a choice, which is different than Alison Roman's New York Times column being put on hold after she slighted Chrissy Teigen). Cancel culture [seems to say](#), "If you do something wrong, you're supposed to be out of here. And it could have been five minutes ago, or it could have been 20, 30 years ago." It seems that the same level of severity (we won't listen to you anymore, you should be publicly disgraced, you should lose your job) is applied to every cancellation, without a way to determine proportionate responses.



This is one reason why cancel culture concerns many people. 153 influential experts in a variety of fields signed [“A Letter on Justice and Open Debate”](#) published in *Harper’s Magazine*, essentially protesting cancel culture:

*The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted...[we’re seeing] an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty. We uphold the value of robust and even caustic counter-speech from all quarters. But it is now all too common to hear calls for swift and severe retribution in response to perceived transgressions of speech and thought...*

*Editors are fired for running controversial pieces...journalists are barred from writing on certain topics...and the heads of organizations are ousted for what are sometimes just clumsy mistakes. Whatever the arguments around each particular incident, the result has been to steadily narrow the boundaries of what can be said without the threat of reprisal...The restriction of debate, whether by a repressive government or an intolerant society, invariably hurts those who lack power and makes everyone less capable of democratic participation. The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to silence or wish them away.*

The letter highlights several concerns about cancel culture; we’ve already mentioned a few of them like disproportionate consequences (getting fired), reductionism (unfair blanket judgments based on a single moment), and mob mentalities, but here are a few more to discuss with your teen:

**No redemption:**

*[Many times, however, cancel culture flies in the face of restorative justice.](#) Rather than having a conversation about how to restore those involved in criminal acts, perpetrators are just canceled. There is no path to healing, to learning, or to making things right. Cancel culture is, in essence, very carceral in that perpetrators are merely punished, and are not given an opportunity to make amends or address the underlying issues which resulted in their behaviors.*

**Encouragement to hide:** For a while, a well-known mission organization had a “three strikes, you’re out” policy for porn use, with the good intention of requiring their leaders to be above reproach. But the policy had unintended consequences. Because missionaries were afraid of losing their jobs, some of them hid their porn

addictions and never got help. This policy came from the same mindset that fuels cancel culture. If someone messes up, they should be permanently removed from leadership. One mistake defines someone’s “goodness” or “badness” forever. If someone knows that past mistakes will write the final conclusion to their story (and that apologizing really won’t help), the only sane response is to hide failure.

**Questionable motives:** Sean D. Young, executive director of the University of California Institute for Prediction Technology, [asks an important question](#) about what motivates people to dig through celebrities’ pasts to expose previous insensitivity: “At what point are you doing it to bring awareness [to bigotry] and try to bring some positive impact and try to prevent it from being done again and at what point is it just bullying?”

**No lasting change:** Canceling celebrities feels powerful, but for the most part doesn’t have long-lasting results. [Jack S.](#), a Twitter user who was part of the movement to cancel Lana Del Rey, acknowledges: “She’s going to be forgiven because that’s always what happens when a celebrity is canceled. It trends over the course of a few days...and their fans will continue to like them as if nothing happened.” We have to ask ourselves, is this the best use of our energy?

**Disagreement silenced:** There’s been heated discussion about the role of free speech on university campuses for a while now. We’re not going to pretend to have a satisfactory answer to that conundrum in this Parent Guide, but we realize that cancel culture, safe spaces, and free speech are interrelated. Here’s the issue: Words hurt. One response has been to create safe spaces, places where offensive ideas aren’t tolerated so that students don’t have to worry about being triggered and re-traumatized. Whoever said the offensive thing is canceled on a micro-scale as a way of holding them responsible for their harmful words.

But do these compassionate measures help or hurt Gen Z? Jonathan Haidt writes about what he calls “the untruth of fragility” in his book, [The Coddling of the American Mind](#),

*the culture of safetyism is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of human nature and of the dynamics of trauma and recovery. It is vital that people who have survived violence become habituated to ordinary cues and reminders woven into the fabric of daily life. Avoiding triggers is a symptom of PTSD, not a treatment for it.*

Human beings are what he and other psychologists call “antifragile.” Without

difficulty, we don't grow. We aren't just resilient (able to endure hardship), we actually need challenges to improve. This is true for our bodies (exercise, literally tearing and stretching our muscles, makes us stronger) and for our minds (respectful debate helps us clarify what we believe, and allows us to discover truth).

[Professor Geoffrey Stone](#) explained why the University of Chicago promotes free speech so fiercely: “the proper response to ideas [students] find offensive, unwarranted and dangerous is not interference, obstruction, or suppression. It is, instead, to engage in robust counterspeech that challenges the merits of those ideas and exposes them for what they are.” Cancel culture fosters the opposite environment, where if you say something offensive about a sacred topic, usually race or sexual orientation, at the very least you're uninvited from public discourse. While the motives are good, the result is an echo chamber where dissent is banned because challenge is seen as dangerous.

**Ostracism.** A friend of ours [attends weekly flat-earth meetings](#). He's a globe-head (i.e. he believes the earth is round), so why hang out with a group that most of us would call crazy and conspiratorial? Well, our friend realized that open, kind conversations help people change their minds. Daryl Davis found the same thing. In his TED Talk, “[Why I, as a black man, attend KKK rallies](#),” he explains how he became friends with the imperial wizard of the Ku Klux Klan,

*I thought, you know what? Who better to ask ‘How can you hate me when you don't even know me?’ than someone who would join an organization whose historical premise has been hating those who do not look like them and who do not believe as they believe...And we conversed - agreed on some things, disagreed on other things...I wasn't there to fight him; I was there to learn from him: where does this ideology come from? Because once you learn where it comes from, you can then try to figure out how to address it and see where it's going.*

That imperial wizard's name is Roger Kelly and he is no longer a member of the Klan, all because Mr. Davis befriended him and really heard him out. Rally after rally. Year after year. Our friend and Mr. Davis asked themselves, “How can we meet people where they are?” Flat-earthers are mostly greeted with pity, and radical klansmen with disdain. It's tough because that pity and disdain feel deserved. Yet by pushing people to the edges of society and not welcoming their disagreement, they are left with no place to go but increasingly radical, narrow, self-confirming echo chambers.

It's a scary and messy proposition, but what if we all talked regularly with someone

we deeply disagreed with about topics we hold close to our hearts? What if we really listened to each other? What if we were willing to be wrong? What if we were bold enough to say when we disagree?

## What are some Biblical principles to help us navigate cancel culture?

**Truth exists.** Cancel culture affirms that there are correct and incorrect viewpoints, [truths and untruths](#). It points to a deep desire for justice and protection of marginalized people.

**All truth is God's truth.** God set the boundaries of reality in place. Whenever we bump up against truth, we are bumping up against the way God made the world. This means that we can take truth from wherever we find it, even if we don't agree with the source 100%. Atheists and Buddhists and secularists and Muslims espouse both true and false ideas. So do people who have been canceled. Follow in the footsteps of [the Bereans](#) and question every idea, asking God what merit it has and what it gets wrong.

**Shame doesn't lead to lasting change.** Cancel culture utilizes shame: You are bad when you mess up, you didn't just do a bad thing. As [Dan Allender puts it](#), "No one escapes the assault of a sneer, a disdainful roll of the eyes. Shame pierces as we feel belittled and exposed as foolish, weak, or undesirable." Think about the last time someone changed your mind about something. How did they convince you that you were wrong? By scoffing at you? By putting you down? By flaunting your failure? Probably not. Those tactics rarely work. Paul writes in Romans, "[God's kindness leads us to repentance](#)." Let's consider what we need in moments of exposure and offer that to those around us.

**Without grace, failure is crushing.** We hate messing up. Yet failure is important. It's how we learn. In her book *Mindset*, Carol Dweck differentiates between [growth mindset](#) and fixed mindset. Growth mindset recognizes that everyone is in process, that it's always possible to improve with time and effort. People with a growth mindset aren't afraid of failing because they realize good habits don't always come naturally or easily. Fixed mindset, a driving force of cancel culture, says talent and ability are innate and unchangeable, so hide your mistakes if you want approval and admiration.

Christianity tells a paradoxical story about human identity. We think [Aleksander Solzhenitsyn put it best](#): “The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.” [We are all broken](#). We all fail. Miserably. Yet we are also [made in the image](#) of an astounding God, giving each of us inestimable value.

The only reason that we can boldly look our sin in the face, plunging the depths of our own inadequacy, is because God’s loving gaze does not turn away from even the ugliest parts of us. God invites us to stop hiding, to evaluate ourselves honestly so that we can enjoy ever more freedom from our broken mindsets and behaviors. [Jesus’ righteousness](#) covers our failure. His obedience on our behalf is the surest foundation for a growth mindset. Our value is [permanently secure](#) because Jesus lived perfectly when we could not. We have nothing left to earn, nothing left to prove. [Henri Nouwen said it this way](#):

*Every time you feel hurt, offended, or rejected, you have to dare to say to yourself: ‘These feelings, strong as they may be, are not telling me the truth about myself. The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God, precious in God’s eyes, called the Beloved from all eternity, and held safe in an everlasting embrace.’*

**Confession brings healing.** “[Confess your sins](#) to one another and pray for one other, that you may be healed.” We get to fully and freely admit how often we say and do dumb things. None of us has arrived. It’s possible for any one of us to slip up because we’re all sinful, in need of grace. This lack of pretense also means a freedom to bring our failure into the light. Everyone knows we’re still figuring things out, that we need help from the Holy Spirit and from our community to overcome sin. Is cancel culture providing space for us to confess and get help?

**Nuance is difficult but essential.** “[Simplicity rarely loses to complexity](#)” on social media. Maybe this is why online dialogue feels increasingly pointless and fraught. Twitter rewards absolutes instead of nuance. Conviction over questions. Certainty over openness. There is no space for “umm” or “I haven’t figured that out yet.” [James 1:19-20](#) instructs believers to be “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.” Our revolutionary calling is to think slowly, to skeptically evaluate our own opinions, and to acknowledge when we’re wrong.

**Humility.** What if we entered discussions asking, “What can I learn from you?” instead of “How can I prove you wrong?” We should be thankful for correction. It would be incredibly arrogant to think that we have every issue completely figured out. Because we believe that we are in process, still being [renewed day by day](#), we should

be grateful for opportunities where weakness is exposed and rooted out.

**We don't have to be defensive.** Jesus was not afraid to engage with people who reflected badly on His identity. He lost social credibility by [hanging out with outcasts](#). Following His example, we don't have to guard our reputations. Are we worried about how certain people may reflect on us? Of being canceled too? What would it look like to befriend those who've been pushed to the margins? To care about both "cancelers" and those who've been canceled?

**[Give people the benefit of the doubt.](#)** Assume that someone has good motives even when they say something offensive. If upon further investigation they actually were trying to be inflammatory, that's a different discussion. But a lot of the time people say silly things unintentionally, and simply need someone to say, "when you said \_\_\_ it hurt my feelings. I would prefer you say \_\_\_ next time." This allows our discussions to center on good and bad ideas instead of labeling people as righteous or sinful.

## Final thoughts

*Let he who is without sin among you cast the first stone at her.* — [Jesus](#)

*This idea of purity and you're never compromised and you're always politically woke and all that stuff — you should get over that quickly. The world is messy. There are ambiguities. People who do really good stuff have flaws. People who you are fighting may love their kids... One danger I see among young people, particularly on college campuses...there is this sense sometimes of, 'The way of me making change is to be as judgmental as possible about other people'... that's not activism. That's not bringing about change. If all you're doing is casting stones, you're probably not going to get that far.* — [former President Barack Obama](#)

If only there were "bad people" and "good people." Wouldn't that make so many issues simpler? We could round up and exterminate all the awful folks and live in a peaceful world. But if you haven't noticed, each one of us has a profound capacity to hurt and a profound ability to heal. Every day we make mixed choices, some helping ourselves and others, some causing angst to ourselves and those around us. The world is messy. We are messy. And it shouldn't surprise us to find brokenness in others and dysfunction in ourselves. This is ultimately why Jesus came, because

we can't fix ourselves, and we just keep wounding the world no matter how hard we try not to. So as we consider the most embarrassing things we've said, or the worst things we've done, let's also consider how we would want to be heard and treated in the midst of our failings. Jesus came to redeem all of us: racists, sexists, and homophobes included. Is cancel culture providing redemption? Or is it just attempting to pronounce final judgment on people who need grace and space to learn better ways of being?

## Related Axis Resources

- [The Culture Translator](#), a **free** weekly email that offers biblical insight on all things teen-related
- [A Parent's Guide to Failure](#)
- [A Parent's Guide to Shame Free Parenting](#)
- Check out [axis.org](#) for even more resources!
- If you'd like access to all of our digital resources, both current and yet to come, for one low yearly or monthly fee, check out the [All Axis Pass!](#)

## Additional Resources

- [“Cancel Culture, Part 1: Where It Came From,”](#) *The Daily*
- [“Cancel Culture Part 2: A Case Study,”](#) *The Daily*
- [“The ‘I’m not a racist’ defense,”](#) *TIME*
- [“Podcast #34 - Jonathan Haidt,”](#) *The Jordan B. Peterson Podcast*
- [Heterodox Academy](#)
- [“Why we can’t stop fighting about cancel culture,”](#) *Vox*
- [“Free Speech Is the Basis of a True Education,”](#) Robert J. Zimmer
- [“Tales From the Teenage Cancel Culture,”](#) *The New York Times*
- [The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure,](#) Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff
- [“Cancel Culture Is Not Real—At Least Not in the Way People Think,”](#) *TIME*
- [“We Can’t Cancel Everyone,”](#) *For Harriet*
- [“Academics Are Really, Really Worried About Their Freedom,”](#) *The Atlantic*
- [“The Danger of a Single Story,”](#) Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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# A Parent's Guide to **CANCEL CULTURE**

## Recap

- Cancel culture is complicated. It's an attempt to hold people accountable for harmful actions or words, but it gets applied to so many situations (sexual harassment, racist acts, unintentionally stupid or insensitive comments, controversial ideas...) that it's difficult to know if canceling someone (firing them, unfollowing them...there are lots of ways to cancel someone) provides true justice.
- Cancel culture is controversial. Some argue that it's a necessary tool to enforce social standards of kind and appropriate speech, while others fear that it silences disagreement because espousing a controversial opinion could permanently damage someone's career or reputation.
- Navigating cancel culture is difficult, but Scriptural principles can help us respond with wisdom and grace.
- Jesus' redemption is for everyone, even the people who deeply offend us. Being at peace with everyone doesn't mean glossing over differences of opinion or ignoring harmful ideas, but it does mean treating everyone respectfully, remembering that we are all divine image-bearers.
- It's easier to think of people in black and white terms, either they are all good or all bad. In reality, each of us has a profound capacity to wound and a profound capacity to heal. We should remember how we want to be treated in moments of failure when we're tempted to write someone off completely (cancel them).

**Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!**

# A Parent's Guide to **CANCEL CULTURE**

## **Discussion Questions**

- What does it look like to disagree with someone well? How do you want to respond when you disagree with someone?
- Who is worth following and paying attention to?
- How can we offer people redemption when they say or do wrong things?
- Can you think of someone who deserves to be canceled? Why or why not? What should their “cancelation” look like?
- Do you know anyone who has ever been canceled? What did that look like? Are you afraid of getting canceled?
- What is justice?
- What is forgiveness?
- What is truth?
- Self Reflection: How am I preparing my kids to interact with people who are different from them and with whom they disagree?

**Hint: Screen shot or print this page to refer back to later!**