



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: More God, Less Crime – Part 2

Guest(s): Dr. Byron Johnson

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Dr. James Dobson: Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener-supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.

Roger Marsh: Well welcome once again to Family Talk, the broadcast ministry of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh and today is May 30th, which means you have today and tomorrow left to take advantage of our special May Matching Grant. Special friends of our ministry have donated \$300,000 to put up as a match, so every dollar you donate today or tomorrow will be doubled. For more information, go to drjamesdobson.org/familytalk.

Have you ever considered what a gift your faith is and how God has moved in your life? Now, imagine how God could touch the lives of others in the corners of our communities, even our prisons. Well, rest assured that he is and today's guest here on Family Talk, Byron Johnson, is back to talk more about this issue with Michele Bachmann. Byron has done extensive research of how faith-based programs have impacted those who are incarcerated. He'll also be sharing about how this research shows how faith affects human flourishing as well. Byron Johnson is Professor of Social Sciences, Director of the Institute for Studies of Religion, and the Director of the program on Pro-Social Behavior at Baylor University. And now, let's join Michele Bachmann and Byron Johnson right now on Family Talk.

Michele Bachmann: Welcome back everyone to Family Talk Radio. We are so thrilled that you are here today and if you missed yesterday's program with Dr. Byron Johnson, you'll want to hear yesterday's program. He's entirely inspirational, one of the top academics in America in his area of study in criminology, and Dr. Byron Johnson has dedicated his life to understanding the impact of faith on crime and criminology, and he has been a part of some of the largest studies in the United States on this area. He wrote a very important book called *More God, Less Crime: Why Faith Matters, and How It Could Matter More*. We talked yesterday about faith and the impact in the United States and what the surveys say and what they don't say. But today we're going to shift over into Dr. Byron Johnson's area of expertise that he spent his Ph.D. and his decades of academic research on, leading one of the largest studies in America to understand the influence of

faith on crime and how we can rectify and better deal with this important area of American life.

And then we'll get into talking about his latest study that he's involved in on human flourishing. So let's open up, Dr. Johnson, with your work at Baylor. And it's not just yourself, it's other researchers as well. And would you just lay the foundation for our audience to understand how important this work is in trying to deal with rectifying this issue of crime? It's like nothing that we have seen in modern memory, it has spiked in particular in the last five to 10 years, but your work has something to say about what works and what doesn't work for crime, especially in our major metropolitan cities.

Byron Johnson: Well, thank you Michele. We mentioned Dr. Dobson yesterday and one of his close friends was Charles Colson, the former Watergate figure. And so Chuck Colson, as most of your listeners may know, founded something called Prison Fellowship, which is a ministry dedicated to working with prisoners in the United States through faith-based programs. And so, Chuck in 1976 started Prison Fellowship and I was asked to start doing research of these programs and Prison Fellowship was very forward-thinking because most faith-based organizations don't have independent researchers come in and look at their programs. But Chuck was open to that because he was so confident that what they were doing actually made a difference. So in the nineties, I started doing research for Prison Fellowship, and study after study we produced showing that there is hope for people that wind up in prison, that they can become rehabilitated, and that for many of these people, faith is absolutely central to their identity transformation. As the Bible talks about going from the old to the new person, we actually found the data support that adage that we've heard so often growing up in churches.

Michele Bachmann: And that wasn't just anecdotal, that was honest academic research-

Byron Johnson: Oh, sure.

Michele Bachmann: ... that you had done and published. Again, you're the top scholar in The United States on this issue of understanding the impact of faith on crime. In your book, *More God, Less Crime*, you wrote in your book as a matter of fact that, "Religion is a powerful antidote to crime and that religion can promote beneficial outcomes and patterns of behavior as well."

Byron Johnson: Yeah, these are all empirically based findings. These are not anecdotes. I think that people oftentimes hear about a person whose life has been transformed. They once were an addict and they've been clean for 20 years. These are powerful stories. That's not what we do. We do studies where we look at an entire population or a big sample from an entire population and then we have a control group. So this group gets the intervention. This group doesn't get the intervention to see if there are differences between them over time. So you get a baseline and then you see if these get interventions that are faith-based have an impact. And consistently, this is what we have found over the years. And

then, Chuck Colson also started something called Prison Fellowship International, which takes that same message around the world. And now Prison Fellowship International is in 60% of the prisons around the world.

And we're doing research now for Prison Fellowship International. And we're finding the same thing outside of the US that we find in the U.S, and that is that participation in these Bible-based programs have huge consequences for inmates. It reduces bad behavior while they're in prison and it also reduces the likelihood that they'll be rearrested when they get out of prison. And so, if you're a policymaker, the one thing that you want to be able to say is we know that this program reduces recidivism and that's what the public wants. They don't want people to come out of prison and harm society when they return to the community. And so, all this data that we've compiled over the years, and when I first started doing the research with Chuck Colson back in the nineties, there were just a few scholars doing work like this in the whole country. And now of course, there are many scholars doing this work and a significant body of evidence supports the kinds of things that you and I are talking about.

So, not only does religion help reform offenders, it helps kids stay out of trouble in the first place. So this is the thing about religion that's so important, going to church, and because it somewhat inoculates young people from making bad decisions, be it alcohol, drugs, or other kinds of criminal or delinquent activities.

Michele Bachmann: It is truly amazing. That's what I love about your work, and you wrote that in your book, too, that the effect of religion remains significant even in the absence of other factors. And you said, I'm quoting from your book, "Studies have demonstrated that high-risk youth were much less likely to be involved in crime and delinquent behavior if they regularly attended church." That seems like that should be obvious. And yet, that doesn't seem to be a part of the equation in a lot of these other secular programs when they're trying to deal with crime. But that's very local, that's very local and very personal to that student. And it's part of the answer for highly religious, low-income youth from high-crime areas.

Byron Johnson: I like to think about the counterfactual. What would our big urban centers be like without congregations? That's a scary thought because these congregations, and sometimes they're maligned, they do such great work and they become a family to people that attend those congregations. And so that's why even for people that are raised in a home where they might have a parent incarcerated, but they're embedded within a congregation, they get the protective benefit of having been a part of a bigger family. So, there are these enormous benefits of just attending church and such a simple thing to do. And so if you were going to give advice to someone that was young and just starting out in life, one of the things that you would say to them is, "If you're not a member of a congregation, you should be. It'll be good for you. It'll be good for your marriage, it'll be good for your kids."

Michele Bachmann: And remember the lie that was stated, I think maybe it was in the seventies and in the eighties, it was a lie going around that said, "You really shouldn't take your children to church. You should let your child just discover on their own if they're interested in God or if they want to go to church."

Byron Johnson: Yep.

Michele Bachmann: And that's another lie from the pit of hell because parents who regularly take their children to church are providing inoculation around them, even in the poor inner city areas, even if you're a single mom or a single dad. The power of taking that child to church because, as you wrote, "The churches are enormous repositories of goodwill." And when you think of the power and the glue of the community of a black inner city church, white inner city church, Latino inner city church, whatever the ethnicity background is, those churches may not have a lot of money in them, but what they are doing for that community is more than can be imagined. And in fact, you wrote, "Houses of Worship build and sustain more social capital and social capital of more varied forms than any other type of institution in America." That's an incredible statement.

And as I was reading through your terrific book, Dr. Johnson, on *More God, Less Crime*, it occurred to me, for those of us who attend maybe rural or suburban churches, and no church is super wealthy, but if we have any extra in the budget, wouldn't it be great if our church would partner with an effective inner city church, and we would ask that church, "What do you need? How can we come alongside you? How can we be a part of the answer?" Because what I read in your book, Dr. Johnson, is that the local churches, the congregation, that was the most effective intervention to find mentors, to find programs, to link the families, the parents, and the youth with positive alternatives as opposed to negative influences. And if those of us who don't live in those neighborhoods could take our churches and partner up with those churches and help provide the resources they need, what a blessing that would be to deal with this absolute epidemic of crime all across the United States.

Byron Johnson: I think that that's such a great point. And there are examples of those kinds of partnerships, Michele, that you're calling for. I think it's fantastic to do that, urban-suburban partnerships. And the interesting thing is there that you hit the nail on the head, but there's another byproduct. And that byproduct is that these inner city churches have something that a lot of the suburban churches need, too. And that is that a lot of these are houses of prayer, of people of huge commitment. And that, too, is something that can be transmitted in the other direction. So it's not like we're going to come lift you all out of poverty, but we need to learn from you, how can you help us? One of the things that we're finding in our prison studies is that we're finding guys that are on death row are flourishing.

Michele Bachmann: Talk about that.

Byron Johnson: Yeah. It's because-

Michele Bachmann: That's counterintuitive, Dr. Johnson.

Byron Johnson: Yeah. Here are people that not only know they're not getting out of prison, they know that they're going to be executed at some point, but because they've experienced such a profound transformation in their life, these people study the Bible in ways that many people on the outside of prisons never will probably study the Bible. And they have such joy and peace and contentment. And how do I know this, is because I spend a great deal of time in prisons talking to these people over time. And so, what I'm saying is that we can learn a lot from people that are actually incarcerated about how we should then live our own lives outside of prison because of the profound transformation that's taken place there. So I think this maybe leads to our next topic of flourishing.

Michele Bachmann: Yeah, I think so. Before we go there, I just wanted to mention you had a powerful video that you showed to us about a seminary that began in a prison. And so, there were various prisoners who went into this program and they actually went through the seminary to get a seminary degree. And that whole prison was transformed because of the lives that were transformed of these prisoners. It was one of the most powerful videos I'd ever seen.

Byron Johnson: Yeah. So this particular prison is the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola, Louisiana. And the prison is built on the grounds of a former plantation. And the slaves came from Angola, Africa. So the prison is known as Angola and a similar transformation is now taking place at Parchman Prison in Mississippi, where they are training inmates who are serving long prison sentences to become ministers. And then these ministers are forming congregations, starting ministries to change the culture of the prison itself. So, I think we always look for the answers from the outside, how can we go into prisons and fix them? And what we're finding is the answers are already in those prisons. We just need to be able to find out how to unleash that power that's already there to transform from the inside out. And so, the inmates themselves are part of the solution. And we like to say that these inmates are assets to be cultivated rather than thinking of them as problems that need to be managed. And so that, too, is a paradigm shift from how criminologists have tended to think about prisons.

Michele Bachmann: Yes. Because it is the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, the regeneration of new life, new birth, being born again through Jesus Christ, and we see transform from the inside out just like Jesus said, it's the overflowing out of our heart. That's where this life comes from. And I want to encourage everyone in our audience today, we get so disgusted when we look at the crime. It is imperative that we start praying and praying over our own cities, and then think about this, what can our congregation do to partner up with another congregation and help being part of that solution? Because I loved how you wrote about these violence-free zones, and you take the individuals who've been involved in violence, who are transformed and that they weigh in, they understand this life, and they weigh in finding the solutions. It is powerful. The people who are listening to us today on Family Talk radio, how can they find out more information on, what about the prisons in my state, I'd like to see us start a

seminary or bring more faith into these prisons. Where can people go for more help, Dr. Byron Johnson?

Byron Johnson: I'm so glad you said that because I would've forgotten otherwise. But let me just give a website. It's www.baylor.edu, B-A-Y-L-O-R, and then I-S-R, Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion, .org. If you go to that website, almost all of our work, Michele, is there and available and people can download it.

Michele Bachmann: Well, and I'm sure that our listeners will talk to us about the Global Human Flourishing Study because this is another great piece of inspirational news.

Byron Johnson: Yeah, the Global Flourishing Study was launched a couple of years ago. It's funded by the Three Templeton Foundations, the Fetzer Institute, and another four foundations on top of that. And it's a massive study done with our partner, The Gallup Organization at Baylor Harvard, and the Center for Open Science. We're following more than 200,000 people around the world in 22 countries, 40 different languages, the same people over time. Something like this has never even been attempted before. So it's a landmark project.

Michele Bachmann: The largest study ever.

Byron Johnson: Yeah, the largest panel study ever conducted. And so we're very excited about it. The data from wave one, it'll be a five wave study. So for the next five years, we will be interviewing these same people. And so the data are out for wave one and we are working on many papers right now.

Michele Bachmann: And what does it show us? Tell us.

Byron Johnson: It shows that flourishing is... It's a complicated topic because I think people hear about happiness and they think that if you're happy, you're flourishing. And we would say that happiness is just a sliver of what it means to flourish. Flourishing is much more than that. And so flourishing is when you're doing well in all areas of life. Are you doing well socially? Are you in relationships with other people? So many people today are isolated and lonely, perhaps more than ever. And we see this in the news, and when we see suicide and addictions at record levels, it's not surprising. So, obviously people that are in social relationships tend to do better, but what about people... Do they have meaning and purpose in their life? And then how are they doing in their physical health because that's important, too.

Are people in pain? Are they suffering? And then how are they doing mentally? And then how are they doing in terms of security with their finances? These things are all important and you need to look at all of these things to see, are people doing well overall? And so, like I said, some of the prisoners that we are studying, they don't have any money. They may have a commissary with a few dollars in it, but some of them are just doing remarkably well in these other areas that we're studying. And so, you may flourish in one or two areas, but

what if you're flourishing in all of those areas? And so what we want to know, is who's flourishing around the world, and then what are the determinants of flourishing? And if people are not flourishing, why are they not flourishing? And then what can we do with that data to help the world and to help people become better?

One of the things that we're doing, in addition to asking a host of questions with these people, we're also asking them about things like their faith. And the early data is quite amazing, that flourishing is something that's aided by having faith. So we will be producing scores and scores of studies over the next few months and years that will dig deep into these topics of what it means to flourish. And I know that there's been enormous interest even from secular organizations that are household names that all your listeners would be aware of, they, too, want to know how people flourish because they want their employees to flourish. And we think that this study will be kind of a galvanizing force for people around the world to find out how they, too, might flourish.

Michele Bachmann: I am so thrilled to hear about the Human Flourishing Study, and especially the fact that you're reviewing and looking at the impact of the faith input in people's lives and what that means for them as well. This has been such an honor, Dr. Byron Johnson of Baylor University, to have you on the Family Talk Show today, because here you are, you are the leading scholar in the United States dealing with the impact of faith on criminology, but you're also involved in the largest research study ever done in the history of the world studying human flourishing and what are the impacts, what are the whys involved in how we flourish as people, not just in the United States, but globally.

This has been a powerful two-day show, and I want to thank you for bringing hope and inspiration to the Family Talk audience so that we can know and understand that our churches aren't failing and dying, they're actually growing. And when we see the information about the positive impact that faith has even in criminals' lives who are on death row, and then also what you're doing proactively with the Human Flourishing Study, what you've taught us today is that when we read and understand and apply the Word of God from an empirical point of view, from academic research that is not censored, we can see that that is showing the power of the application of the Word of God. And I'm so grateful for you, an academic who's persevered, despite the bias that you endured, both as a young college professor and then later on in life with important studies that you were trying to pass, but you had bias against you.

I want to thank you and I want to encourage those in our audience who God is calling you into a career of academia, not to be discouraged at what you've seen with recent events on college campuses. There is a need for the Godly calling that God puts on the hearts of very intelligent men and women and insightful men and women. We need you in academia. So thank you Dr. Byron Johnson, we appreciate you for your work and we appreciate you for all that you've shared and inspired with our audience today.

Byron Johnson: Well, thank you, Michele. It's just been great to be on the show with you today. And so, it's just a delight to share with your listeners all this good news, and I look forward to doing it again in the future.

Michele Bachmann: Well, we will. And on behalf of Dr. James and Shirley Dobson, I know that they would want me to thank you so much for what you've shared with our audience today. Thank you again, Dr. Byron Johnson of Baylor University.

Byron Johnson: You bet.

Roger Marsh: Well, what a hope-filled conversation featuring Michele Bachmann and Professor Byron Johnson today here on Family Talk. I pray that everyone who hears this broadcast will find the peace and wisdom God provides, and that each day you are moving closer to living a prosperous life in God's economy. Amen to that. Now, if you'd like to learn more about Byron Johnson or his book called *More God, Less Crime*, simply visit us online at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. Now, as this month of May winds down to a close, I want to remind you that Family Talk is completely listener supported. And right now, thanks to some special friends of our ministry, we have a \$300,000 matching grant in place all this month, which means today and tomorrow. Every dollar you donate will help encourage a caregiver, inspire a marriage, and support a family. And with the matching grant, your gift will go twice as far for double the impact. You can make a tax-deductible donation online@drjamesdobson.org.

That's drjamesdobson.org. You can also give a gift over the phone when you call 877-732-6825. That's 877-732-6825. I'm Roger Marsh, and on behalf of everyone here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, thanks so much for your prayers and your faithful financial support, and be sure to join us again tomorrow for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.