



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** Setting a Higher Standard – Part 1

**Guest(s):** Dr. William Bennett

**Air Date:** January 21, 2021

[Listen to the broadcast](#)

**Dr. Clinton:** Hi everyone. This is Dr. Tim Clinton, executive director of the James Dobson Family Institute and president of the American Association of Christian Counselors. I wanted to take a moment to let you know that we here at the James Dobson Family Institute love you, and we're praying for you. If you're struggling and need some encouragement, we'd be honored to pray with you. You can call us toll free at (877) 732-6825. Or simply go to [DrJamesDobson.org](http://DrJamesDobson.org).

**Dr. William Bennett:** Unless we change the shifts and currents of the culture, we will continue in the direction that we have been headed. And if we do, this society will cease to be the kind of country we intended it to be through the founding and through the middle part of this century.

**Roger Marsh:** Well, that is certainly a thought provoking clip from Dr. Bill Bennett, a dear friend of Dr. James Dobson and our guest today here on Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh.

In a speech delivered in 1995, the former Secretary of Education and Drug Czar touched on a fascinating concept called "the atheism of distraction." An idea first put forth by the Reverend John Courtney Murray. In other words, if people are so consumed by the allure of pop culture found on the screen, then they are virtual atheists. They have no time to contemplate who might've created them and for what purpose.

Let's listen now to part one of Dr. Bill Bennet's winsome presentation entitled, Setting a Higher Standard, today on Family Talk.

**Dr. William Bennett:** I'm an old new dad. I didn't get married till I was 40, and we have two young boys. And something you all know but I've just discovered is that you may not think they're listening sometimes, but they're listening. The head is turned. It doesn't look like you have their attention. And then six months later, they repeat almost verbatim what you have said. Sometimes for good. Sometimes for ill.

I started actually not as Secretary of Education, but as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. That's not the Arts Endowment. The Arts

Endowment is the one with the pictures. The Humanities Endowment is the one with the books, but they're dirty too, but you have to be a professor to know that they're dirty; deconstruction and all that.

I was appointed a year after Reagan was elected. They told Reagan he had to have a professor of the humanities to run the National Endowment for the Humanities. So they had a nationwide search to find a professor of the humanities who had voted for Ronald Reagan. There were three of us and they thought it would be very controversial, so I got the nod and there I went.

Then I did become Secretary of Education. And I will never forget my first clipping, which my under Secretary Gary Bauer, close friend of both of ours and of many of yours, cut for me and had it framed for me. It was my first clipping in the Washington Post as Secretary of Education. It was a headline on page A3 and it said, "Bennett criticized by educators for backing parents." And that was the beginning of a very controversial career. We said in the first speech that we thought we ought to listen more to the common sense of parents than to some of the crazy theories of educators, which had gotten us into the trouble that we are in.

That and a couple of other things led to an editorial by David Broder saying, "Get rid of Bennett, bring back Terrel Bell." The Washington Post editorialized for three days about how bad I was. We went to a cabinet meeting. I was getting very bad press. So some of my colleagues, courageous warriors that they were, were avoiding me and we sat at the cabinet table. Ronald Reagan, President of the United States came in and sat down and said, "Bennett, you're getting in a lot of trouble." And I said, "Yes, Sir." I could feel them drawing even further away from me. He leaned over and he said, "What's wrong with the rest of you?" "Yes, Sir."

Now, in situations like this in the workplace, it's a little bit like the family. And this was the laying on of hands of the father. This was the blessing of the father. And from that day forward, I have gone on without any conscience at all, saying what I thought to be right. And Ronald Reagan's phrase, "I don't think I can get rid of this department, but maybe we can represent the good sense of the American people while we're there," and that's what we tried to do.

Anyway, after that job, I was out of government for a couple of months and then came back in as director of National Drug Control Policy, or Drug Czar. The only advantage in that job, which some of you have heard me say before, is that I could refer to my wife as Czarling and to our two little boys as the Czardines. All right.

I come from one of those great moments of family values called the 4th of July with my family, where everyone behaved like a firecracker as far as I could tell. Everyone was exploding every two or three minutes. We were at the beach, about 95 degrees. And on this particular beach, they have a 4th of July parade with golf carts and people rent golf carts, old golf carts, and go up to the beach.

My wife's idea, Czarlings's idea was to pull our two children and several other children so that we would be representing Washington crossing the Delaware. She got the hats, she got some garbage bags to make capes, lacrosse sticks, and other things became the weapons. And we had this boat being pulled by a golf cart. I was not asked to help except for lifting the boat onto the hitch. I'm not a skilled workman. I have the ability of a hippopotamus and the temper of a viper when I'm asked to do this sort of thing.

So anyway, this went on and on. I would say only about 15 or 20 family blowups during the course of this setup. As you all know, different families have different tempers. We don't have an acute temper problem. We have a chronic temper problem. It never goes that serious, but it just happens all the time. In any case, four very strong-willed people.

Elayne and the boys were just about to make it to the reviewing stand, when, as you might expect, a golf cart pulling a boat ran out of steam. She was 30 feet from the reviewing stand. I will pick up the pace of this. She didn't know what to do. She had me out of the picture completely. She wanted me waiting in the parade to do a standing ovation when they came by, to try to affect the judge's ruling. This is all virtue.

Anyway, she had a couple of other guys disconnect the boat from the golf cart. She then man hauled the boat, pulled it by herself in front of the reviewing stand. We got no prize. The prize was won by one of these families that I suppose you have to admire, but find difficult to. They had a four cart, the Brady Bunch at the beach. It was about 80 feet long and they must have been working on it since last July 5th. In any case, it was a nice piece of work. We got no award except Elayne did get the honorary John Deere Tractor Award, which was a new distinction.

Anyway, so I actually am pretty pleased to be here, to travel the state to join you. Let me be brief in my remarks and tell you what I am thinking about and working on these days in relation to your work. I want to tell you how much I admire your work, the work that you do, and never has your work been needed more. It seems to me that the work that you do, the work that Jim Dobson does, the work that so many people whom I admire do, is very difficult in present circumstances. It seems to me that in many places in America, not perhaps in the people who listen on a regular basis to you, Jim, and listen to you, ladies and gentlemen on a regular basis. But to many other people and in many other places, the spiritual axis of life has grown dim to use Solzhenitsyn's phrase: I believe is the single most important fact of our time that the spiritual axis of life has grown dim.

When I was growing up, there was a lot of talk in the air about atheism and atheists. There were debates about atheism. There were debates about the existence of God. Madalyn Murray O'Hair was a big figure because she was an atheist and wanted her children to be atheists. It seemed to me growing up as a little boy, going to Catholic school at the time, these were very dangerous and

parlous times. I was wrong. Those were better times than today for the issue at stake, the spiritual access of life. Because at least there was in almost all quarters of society, either an active religious belief or a serious reflection that constituted itself often in debate. But today, we don't have atheism by debate. Today we have, in John Courtney Murray's phrase, "Atheism of distraction, atheism by distraction."

You remember the debates about God is dead, the headlines and Time Magazine and so on. This too, I thought was a very bad time, but it turned out not to be as bad a time spiritually as much of today is. Because if people pay no mind to God and to things spiritual, then you do not have to kill them. If people are distracted by television, if people are distracted by the movies, if people are distracted by any of the other things that constitute the distractions of modernity, the messages of modernity, particularly as they are addressed to the young, then there aren't going to be big debates about atheism and about the existence of God.

An intense medieval style debate, or debate of the style of the 1950s about whether God exists or not would be a lot healthier than the kind of loose and woozy and dopey talk shows we have now in which a moderator might say, "Well, you believe in God, that's fine. And you don't, that's fine. What do you believe in, vegetables, animals, clothespins? What do you believe in?" This deadening moral relativism and subjectivism of today in many quarters is a much, much worse situation.

We have replaced many of these intense debates and discussions of our culture and of our great civilization with things that are much worse. Today, we live in a time in which I am now convinced the single most important and potent educational instrument for the common citizen, that is the most common and important educational experience for American children, is not that of good parents. It is not that of church. It is not that of school. The most important common education of the young today, is television. And that is a very, very bad and tragic thing.

We have been conducting a social experiment in this country for the last 35 years. Let us raise a percentage of our children, a large number of our children, not by God's commandments, but by the messages of TV commercials. "Just do it." "Don't worry. Be happy." "Go for it." "You only go around once. Grab for all the gusto you can." We have been teaching that and we are now reaping the consequences. I suppose more accurately, we are reaping the whirlwind.

But as counselors to families, as counselors to people who are engaged in marriage, you know, you must know that such messages have consequences. You must know that to people who are told, "if you're unhappy, something is wrong, that you must go for it or just do it. Throw away your inhibitions, throw away your guilt, throw away your conscience, just go for it," that you could not design if you sat at the drawing board, an ethos, an ethic, if we may call it that in

quotes, a philosophy of life or lifestyle, more inimical, more antithetical, more dangerous to the institution of marriage and family.

Because marriage and family depend not on impulse, not on "just do it." Not on pleasure, indeed not on happiness. What they depend on is something else, something deeper, something more significant. They depend upon commitment. They depend upon a view of the self that sees the self as a moral and spiritual thing, a moral and spiritual presence that must be acknowledged, that must be respected. If the self is only made in moments and bursts of pleasure and of delight of this feeling and that sensation, then there is no self over time, which must be satisfied, or can only be satisfied through commitment.

One of the most important writers of our day, Barbara Defoe Whitehead, who has written most recently several articles to follow up her Atlantic Monthly article, entitled Dan Quayle Was Right, points out that if you go to the greeting card section now of stores and read some of the new Hallmark cards, you will find this new view of self, laid plain.

There's a whole section for divorced parents. And one of the cards Ms. Whitehead found said to the divorced parent, this is when you send to the divorced parent, "Welcome to the hot new single. Life is looking exciting for you. Hope things turn out to be exciting." Of course, next to that card is a card for the child of the divorced parent, which says, "I'm sorry, I won't be able to be there with you when you may need me. But you know I'm only a phone call away."

That is the modality of our time. That is the fact of our time for all too many children. Not, thank God, for all children. Not, thank God, for most children. But for way too many children and the numbers continue to increase. With television, we have bought the modern gospel, which said it is not self-realization, not dignity, not prayer, not commitment, not God's will or law that must be respected, but that it is happiness that must be worshiped. Happiness must be sought at all costs. And if happiness is not achieved, then something is wrong and one must begin anew. Begin anew with a new family, or a new spouse, a new job, a new career, a new set of beliefs, a new set of clothes, a new religion, a new God. If one is not happy, if that great self is not happy, says the new religion, the new commandment, the commandment of television, then do it another way.

Where was it written and when was it written in the 60s or 70s that happiness is not a pursuit, but a right? Where was it spoken so that it was believed by so many, so quickly? How did this notion get into the modern mind and be there and remain there, so stuck when all of human experience defies it as a natural and easy object? All of human experience teaches that happiness retreats the more intensely it is pursued. Happiness is like a cat. If you forget it, if you go about your business, if you worship, if you pray, if you work, if you keep your commitments, then it jumps into your lap. But pursued directly as the pursuit of

pleasure, as people from Socrates, Aristotle, the Bible have taught us, it can never be realized in that way, because we are not made that way. We are moral and spiritual beings.

The instant culture has taken its toll and nowhere has it taken a greater toll than on families, and of course the dependence of families, children. We have become in many places, the kind of society America in 1990, the greatest country in the world, militarily, the country with the greatest history of economic success, we have become in many places, this America in the 1990s, the kind of country, the kind of society that any civilized 19th century society would have sent missionaries to. That's the kind of society that we have become because of this instant culture, because in the belief that happiness is the point of life, because of the philosophy of television, because the spiritual axis of life has grown dim.

Consider fatherhood, which you will this week in great depth and detail. When I was Drug Czar, I spent a lot of time in patrol cars, and treatment centers, and hospitals, and in courts and in prisons. On three visits to prisons talking to prisoners, I found out something very interesting. Many of the men in prison today will acknowledge responsibility for many of the things they have done. But in one visit to a high security facility in Alabama, I talked to 10 men, each of whom acknowledged his responsibility for his crimes: bank robbing, killing, raping, whatever.

But there was one area where they would not acknowledge responsibility, and that was in the fathering of their children. Yes, they admitted they had fathered or sired a number of children, but they emphatically insisted they were not responsible for those children. Their excuses were lame. They were, "She consented. She said fine. That's her problem, that's not mine."

Where did we sever this connection? Where did we undo the work of civilization? Where did we undo the work, which has been teaching throughout the centuries, that it is a man's solemn obligation to care for children? I don't know when exactly it happened, but it happened pretty recently and it has happened in some quarters, pretty decisively. In Latin, there are two words for father: pater and genitor. Genitor is he who sires the child. We are doing fine on that front in America today. You do not have to tell our boys how to become genitors. They know how to do it. We don't need the schools to do it. We don't need the schools to be instructing or exhorting people to do it. On the front of genitor, American boys are second to none in the world. World-class standing for biological siring.

But the second word in Latin for father is pater. And pater is he who takes responsibility. The pater is the father who says to the child, "You are now part of this world. I name you. I take you as my own, as God has taken me as his own. I give you my name. I will protect you from the world and I will protect the world from you." While we're very long on genitor these days, ladies and gentlemen, but we need a lot of work on pater. But unless we change the shifts and

currents of the culture, we will continue in the direction that we have been headed. And if we do, this society will cease to be the kind of country we intended it to be through the founding and through the middle part of this century.

In 1960, 5% of the children born in this country were born out of wedlock. In 1990, 30% of the children born in this country were born out of wedlock. Senator Moynihan, senior Democrat from New York says that by early in the 21st century, if current trends continue, we will have a 50% illegitimacy rate in this country. These are very serious numbers.

I don't want to overstate and be overly gloomy, but it is important to understand the nature of the challenge before us. We have a shift, a seismic shift in people's beliefs about themselves, about life, about happiness, about what they are entitled to. And nowhere has this shift been more consequence, than in the brains of men, and their other organs, and their recognition, or lack of recognition, of their responsibility toward families and children. The choices aren't between family values and some other kind of values.

I never much liked the phrase family values. It seemed to me to suggest a sort of options in a cafeteria or options in department stores. As if you could have family values, or bachelor values, or travel values or some other kind of thing. If you live in a family and are part of a family, I don't think what you describe, if you were accurately describing what you live in, you describe as family values. More accurate might be to call it the family planet, as opposed to some other planet, some other solar system, some other constellation. It is not like chocolate cake or syrup or no syrup. It is a way of being. It is a way of being human. It is a way of being responsible, unlike any other way in life.

Josiah Royce, great American philosopher, said once, "It's hard to wrestle with angels, but there are some blessings that can't be won in any other way." Well, it's hard sometimes to be in a family. But as I have found, old new father, there are some blessings that cannot be won in any other way. And we need to make the case, not, it seems to me in 1995, as a case for family values over some other kind of values, but to put this thing in as realistic and stark language as we can. The choice is not between family values and some other set of values. The choice is between values or virtues, if you will, and nihilism. That is what the choice is about.

It is about whether we regard ourselves as moral and spiritual beings or whether we regard ourselves as something that television advertises to: a sum of sensations, data, feelings, emotions. Which are we? The question, as the philosophers would say, is one of philosophical anthropology. Who do we think we are?

If you talk to teenagers today, you will get the sense, talking to many of them, that they do not think of themselves in the way that we think God has made them. They do not talk about themselves as if they were creatures made by

God. Of course, this is not true of all of them, thank God. But it is true of all too many of them, and we must be more confident and more assertive to them about what they are. We must not let them undervalue themselves. We must not let them state their ontological identity wrongly. We must correct them and tell them who they are, in Whose image they are made, and what destiny is theirs, what deserves to be loved and what they deserve to avoid.

Roger Marsh:

Well, that applause for Dr. Bill Bennett affirms his plea that we challenge the next generation to realize their identity and destiny should be deeply rooted in a relationship with God. And that message is especially important for our own children living under our own roofs right now.

You're listening to Family Talk and we encourage you to learn more about the ministry of Dr. Bill Bennett, including his many writings, like *The Book of Virtues* when you visit our broadcast page at [Dr. JamesDobson.org](http://Dr.JamesDobson.org). Just go to D-R [JamesDobson.org](http://JamesDobson.org) and click on the broadcast tab.

Please know how much we appreciate your prayers and your financial support of our ministry as well. You can send a gift through the mail when you write to the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, PO Box 39000, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80949. Again, that mailing address is the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, PO Box 39000, Colorado Springs, Colorado. Zip code: 80949.

Make sure to tune in again tomorrow for the conclusion of Dr. Bill Bennet's powerful presentation called "Setting a Higher Standard." That's coming your way right here on the next edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. Thanks for listening.

Announcer:

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