



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Average Joe: The Coach Joe Kennedy Story – Part 1

Guest(s): Joe Kennedy

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Dr. James Dobson: Welcome everyone to Family Talk. It's a ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh and I hope you're settling into autumn well. Have you noticed the beauty of the leaves changing colors in your area? Fall certainly is a beautiful time of year, that's for sure. It's a captivating reminder of God's glory and His creation all around us. It's also a time to lean closer to Him as he guides us through whatever change or season we may be facing. I also want to take a moment to remember those in Israel who lost their lives in the heinous attack by Hamas on October the 7th, 2023. That day kicked off a war that as you know is still raging on right now. I encourage you to take a moment today to pray for Israel and the safe return of the 97 unaccounted for remaining hostages and that peace will finally come and bring an end to the fighting and loss of life.

You know our country is facing many significant challenges today. On top of much economic strife, many families are having to pick up the pieces and rebuild their lives after severe storms and flooding, lives have been lost and communities literally destroyed. Please join me in praying for those whose lives have been turned upside down by the recent hurricanes especially. Also, pray for those who are helping with search and rescue and for those who are working to restore roadways and utilities, some areas hadn't seen such devastation in over a hundred years.

Now on today's edition of Family Talk, we're going to hear the story of a man who dealt with an unexpected situation that all started with a simple private prayer. A former Marine turned high school football coach found himself in a massive legal battle simply for praying after football games. His name is Joe Kennedy and recently Gary Bauer sat down with Coach Joe as he talked about what he went through and how it has affected his life and his faith. Also, coach Kennedy's remarkable story has been made into a movie, it's called "Average Joe," and it'll be releasing in theaters this Friday. Joe Kennedy is married to his lovely wife, Denise, and together they have four grown children. All right, let's join Gary Bauer and Coach Joe Kennedy right here, right now on Family Talk.

Gary Bauer: Hello everybody. Welcome to Family Talk. I'm Gary Bauer. I'm the Senior Vice President of Public Policy here at the James Dobson Policy Center, and today on our program we're going to spend some time with a man who I think many of you probably already feel you know very well because he's come to be known as the Praying Football Coach. Our guest lost his job actually for simply offering a silent prayer after a high school football game and then won his job back and it ended up that the whole controversy was used by God ironically to actually strengthen the status of religious liberty in America. So this is a fantastic story to be reminded about or to hear for the first time. Coach Joe Kennedy is no longer a coach at Bremerton High School in his hometown of Bremerton, Washington. But for millions of us Christians he will, as I said, be forever known as Coach Joe and his case did go all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States.

Just think about that. I mean, a guy stands up in Washington State and it ends up in the Supreme Court and then by a vote of six to three, we have a decision that not only back the coach but strengthen all of our religious liberty. His life story is told very well in the book *Average Joe*. But I have to say there's nothing average about him when you see the courage that he displayed. Average Joe: the remarkable story of one man's battle for religious liberty in the face of moral decline in America. And now, wait for it, "Average Joe" is coming to the big screen. It's sometimes hard to find family entertainment. This is going to be family entertainment. It's coming to the big screen and it will open in theaters nationwide this coming Friday, October 11th. Coach Joe Kennedy, welcome to Family Talk. Dr. Dobson and Shirley send you their warmest regards.

Joe Kennedy: Well, thank you so much. They are just wonderful people. Thanks for having me, Gary.

Gary Bauer: It's a pleasure. Joe, I want to get into your background, what formed you to be the man you are that faced this controversy. I want to say what I'm sure you already know, but maybe not all of our listeners have focused into yet. We're making a big deal at JDFI on Christian citizenship. Now, that means not only being a Christian that pays attention to public policy and what's going on in the public square, but also a Christian that votes, that has the courage to talk to neighbors and friends about the big issues facing our country.

Dr. Dobson feels strongly as we all do that the major problems facing America, whether it's racial reconciliation or the breakup of the family, crime, corruption, whatever it is, these problems are not going to be solved without the active involvement of Christians. And I believe what you did in a high school, in a town that probably most Americans never heard of before the controversy was a perfect example of Christian citizenship. So, if you could, could you just briefly describe for us what happened that led you to make a decision after being ordered not to do so to pray at that high school after some football games?

Joe Kennedy: Right. Now I look back, I could fully understand what God was doing from even when I was in the womb all the times I had trouble growing up in group homes, foster homes and boys homes. The Marine Corps made me a fighter and I really

just didn't see all those pieces put back together until I was faced with this. Now, my team looked at me and they said, "Coach, can't you just give into this and it would be the easiest thing." And I knew at that second that that was not the right thing to do.

I asked these guys to do everything they possibly can to win and to keep fighting when there's time left on the clock, just give everything. And now all of a sudden I'm faced with this and I could do the leadership by example. So when they asked me that, yeah, it would've been the easiest thing, but it was not the right thing to do. And as American, I was an American before I became a Christian and that red bloodedness in me just wanted to fight for what is right. Nobody should have to choose between their faith and their job.

Gary Bauer: You were doing this for a period of time and was it after the football games at your public high school and when did you get called out for doing it?

Joe Kennedy: Right. Now, just about every football team in the nation does a prayer in the locker room before all the coaches took turns with that. We stopped that practice when the school district asked us to. Now, it was always just by myself to start with. That was my covenant with God was just to take a brief, maybe 30 second prayer on the 50 yard line after a game and just give thanks. That went on for eight and a half years. So it wasn't until the eighth year did somebody even begin to notice this and really started this ugly fight, but it was just a simple prayer of thanks and I stopped praying with the team when the school told me to, and that's what led to me ultimately getting terminated was because I refused to give in and stop praying out in public where people could see me.

Gary Bauer: This is a pretty fundamental question. I can think of all kinds of things that you might've done after a football game out on the field, maybe walked across the field with an LGBTQ flag or something like that, and I doubt it would've caused this visceral reaction by the folks that run the school district or your specific school that this was something that it just couldn't be allowed to go uncommented on. That their default position was to tell you to stop exercising your freedom of religion.

Joe Kennedy: Unfortunately, that's the way most things are. It's so much easier just to remove it. You mentioned God in the workplace or in a public square, and all of a sudden this has become something that is bad and it's because of the apathy that we've had as Christians. We sit back and wait for things to happen and most of the things never apply to us. Oh, that's over there, that happens to those people, but now it's in our backyard and we can't stand for that anymore. The school district, when you bring God into it, we should be allowed to bring God anywhere we go because that's who we are as Americans.

Gary Bauer: Joe, I've got a little event in my life and it's nothing like what you put on the line, but every time I hear your story or stories like yours, I remember being in high school--I do actually remember being in high school--when the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that a school prayer, a voluntary school prayer to

begin the school day was unconstitutional. And I was growing up in a tough blue collar town. It was actually controlled by organized crime at the time, which is another whole other story. But I was so astonished when I saw in the newspaper that this decision had been made that when I went to school the next day, I started talking to the other students and even the non-Christians or the kids in school that didn't take faith very seriously thought it was outrageous too.

So, we decided that when the bell rang for everybody to leave homeroom and go to your first class that we instead would have a walkout at the high school. Well, my goodness, that became a front page story in a suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio, and I was quoted and I almost got kicked out of school, but looking back on it actually set in motion some of the things that I ended up devoting my life to. So, let's go back to your life before you had to take this stand, Joe. You mentioned that you had an upbringing which was people would say is not perfect. So, you spent some time in foster care, is that right or?

Joe Kennedy: Yeah, foster homes, boys homes, lived on the streets, broke into cars for places to sleep. I actually broke into a church at one time and just to get out of the rain and find a warm place to sleep.

Gary Bauer: Wow. Well, that's interesting because you broke into the one place where you would've been able to find forgiveness pretty easily, right?

Joe Kennedy: I wish I would've paid attention to that when I was a kid.

Gary Bauer: I'm sure. I'm sure. Tell us about your wife and how you met her. As I recall, she had a major role in you coming to Christ?

Joe Kennedy: Yes, absolutely. We met when we were both nine years old. We were just kids, and the moment I saw her, I knew she took my heart. She was my first love and will be my last love. So that was my first love. The second one was obviously for our country, then we reconnected right when I was getting out of the Marine Corps. I was getting ready to retire and we rekindled our old friendship that we've had over the years and she was a good church girl.

She loved going to church and bringing the kids to youth group, and I thought it was something really cute that she did. And since I was an atheist, I just laughed it off. But as I was failing as a husband and as a father, I knew I needed help in this area because I wanted this to last. I wanted this to be my last love ever. And I finally gave in and surrendered everything to God and I made really a deal with God and said, "If you give me my wife, I'll give you my life." And I had no idea he was going to take me up on that kind of offer, but absolutely is what totally changed the trajectory of my life, our life and our family's life.

Gary Bauer: It's not that you were indifferent to religion, you actually believed that there was no God. So, this is a pretty big change of direction for you and it happened

because of the woman that God brought into your life. That's a story that we also-

Joe Kennedy: There's something about a praying wife, man, I tell you.

Gary Bauer: Yes indeed. Yeah, you're absolutely right. My father was in the first Marine Corps division in the South Pacific in World War II, and everybody I've ever known that was in the Marines came out of the Marines having learned some usually pretty good values in addition to being mentally and physically tough. So, you made it a career in the Marine Corps, is that correct? 20 years?

Joe Kennedy: That is correct. I went into the service when I was 17 and I retired at age 37. That's what really got me into coaching and made me a good coach is because I took the things I learned in the Marine Corps about team building and discipline and leadership, and I applied those to the young men that I was blessed to be with. I contribute everything to the Marine Corps.

Gary Bauer: Wow. So where did you serve?

Joe Kennedy: Yes, you can imagine over a career I was on the East Coast, West Coast, overseas. I got to do a tour in combat in the first Gulf War, and I trained a lot of Marines to go over and fight in Afghanistan and Iraq, so with most of my career.

Gary Bauer: Thank you for your service, Joe. That's incredible. Obviously those conflicts are big in the news right now and we're rethinking our foreign policy and which wars we should get in and which wars maybe we shouldn't get in. But the one thing that remains a constant throughout American history is that when the country's in trouble or when there's a need, men like you answer the call and step up and make sacrifices over and over and over again to save the lives of others, to help people in other countries and to defend our own. So, this is another thing in my view that God has blessed us with in this country built on the idea that our liberty comes from God, that there's always been courageous young men and women willing to stand on the front lines. So when you get out of a 20-year career in the Marine Corps, did you have any difficulties re-entering civilian life and did you go right into high school coaching or how did that pass go?

Joe Kennedy: I had no desire to coach. I don't know anything about football. I didn't know anything about football, so that seemed just all weird to me to begin with. But when I got out, you instantly go through the withdrawals of having that brotherhood with your family, your sense of purpose. You feel absolutely lost. When I retired, I had dark hair, not a gray hair on me. And I tell you, just getting accustomed to working in the civilian sector, it took its toll. I had many times that counseling had to be brought in just like most people in the military just to get us through and re-acclimate us to way the society is ran instead of the way the military's run.

Gary Bauer: Obviously that was true during World War II when so much of the nation was mobilized, but I think in some ways it's even more difficult during the Iraq and Afghanistan era because we live at a time when most Americans don't serve. And so you're coming back into a culture and a society that really doesn't understand the military life, and in addition, you're coming back into a country that for decades now seems to have been moving away from Christianity and from faithfulness at the very time in your life that you were moving toward that.

Joe Kennedy: Yeah, and that's a great thing about God is that his timing is perfect and my life would not have been what it is if I didn't go through all those different steps. Even the generation that I grew up in, now we look at today and see how crazy it is, even serving seems to be almost a joke these days because people don't have what we need to be great citizens to be Americans and proud. We always have to wait till something catastrophic like 9/11 to happen before our country comes together. And it would be so much easier if we just let God in and we're just grateful every single day instead of becoming complacent like we have been.

Gary Bauer: Joe, I think about a month ago, the country was marking, I believe it was the 23rd anniversary of 9/11. When that happened, I remember thinking to myself, "Wow, this changes everything." I mean, nobody's ever going to forget this. Maybe this will bring the country back to God. Maybe this will make the country appreciate freedom more. And of course it did change a lot of things, but today, a couple decades later, there are millions of Americans that weren't even alive yet or they were too young at the time to know what was going on. And it seems, if anything, we're back to where we were before 9/11 and not appreciating what the cost of liberty is and how much God over the entire history of the country has had his hand of protection over America.

Joe Kennedy: I saw it during the Olympics. You do see people that give the glory to God after a lot of the professional sports. You see them giving the glory and it's amazing. We had the one kid that died in professional football a couple years ago, had a heart attack and died right there on the field and the first thing everybody did was turn towards God and he ended up coming back to life. He was dead on the field. So when people pray, it does make a difference. That's why this case went as far as it did and had the outreach that it did is because the nation finally turned towards God. I think this is a great time to be alive and it gives me hope that God still has something to say and that he is going to make his presence known here in America.

Gary Bauer: Well, that's our prayer too, Joe. Now, the movie that's coming out in a few days, Average Joe, and again, you're no average Joe in my mind, but does the movie trace your life that you're sharing with us now, how you became a Christian, the woman you fell in love with? Does the movie cover all of that up and to and through the major controversy you found yourself in at the high school?

Joe Kennedy: Yeah, and that's what we really wanted to do was tell the full story. You just read headlines or a blog and you never get the whole story. I wanted people to

really understand what we went through as people because most people have a great story. They've all gone through trials and tribulations. Ours just happened to make the news and we wanted it to be true. We didn't want to make it a big Hollywood thing, and then we didn't want it to just be that warm feeling kind of movie. We wanted to show the highs and lows of our life and what appeals to every single person pretty much alive goes through things and we wanted to show that. And they were great at really showing exactly what we went through and how we went through it and given the glory to God at the end of it.

Gary Bauer:

Yeah, Joe, in this battle for religious liberty in America of all places, it's amazing we're even going through this, but there is just absolutely no doubt that there is a real effort made to get Christians to kneel in front of secular demands, particularly the ideological demands of the LGBTQ movement. But it's bigger than that. I mean, there's efforts to force Christian doctors and nurses to participate in abortions. It's just you can go down the list over and over again. One of the things I've noticed over the years is that when a Christian is doing what they should be doing, it's often a complaint from the village atheists or a complaint from one of these radical anti-Christian groups. There's a group of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, and then there's an outfit called Freedom from Religion. Boy, they make themselves a pain.

There's a group now that if you start a club at your school that meets after hours for people to read the Bible together, this group comes into the school and demands the right to set up a Satan club. And of course, their purpose is to get the school to go, "Oh my goodness, we got to cancel the Christian club because if we have a Christian club, we have to have a Satan club." That's not legally true either. But I understand in your case, unless I've got the facts wrong, it wasn't some atheist that complained. It was actually, I understand, a parent that liked what they saw doing and they called the school to congratulate them. Is that how it played out?

Joe Kennedy:

One of the administrators came to our football game and saw what we did after the game of two teams come together after just a great battle, and he felt compelled to call our principal and said, "I just want to tell you, I went to the game and I got to tell you what your football program is doing is just awesome." So everything started from a compliment, if you could believe that, and just turned. When you find those one or two people that are the loudmouths that are against God and they make their voice heard, the Separation Church and State, all those people, they all came against us because they saw something that was good and they wanted to turn it into something evil.

Roger Marsh:

Well, coach Joe Kennedy really is a prime example of what it takes to stand up for what is right, no matter the cost. If you'd like to hear more of his powerful testimony, remember he'll be joining us again tomorrow as he finishes his inspiring conversation with Gary Bauer here on Family Talk. Now, if you'd like to learn more about Joe Kennedy or his book, *Average Joe*, simply visit us on the Family Talk app or go to our website at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. And remember the movie "Average Joe" will be hitting theaters this Friday, so make

sure you and your family have plans to go see it. We're less than 30 days away from election day 2024. You might be planning on voting early or maybe you're planning on voting on election day, November the 5th. Well, whatever you decide to do, and whenever you decide to vote, if you're not sure of who you plan to vote for or which issues that are most important to you, you will definitely want to visit our Countdown to Decision 2024 website.

Go to drjamesdobson.org/countdowntodecision2024. There you can sign up to download our free voter guide or watch episodes from our Countdown to Decision 2024 Podcast. New episodes are posted each week leading right up to the election. You can watch interviews with guests like Eric Metaxas, Kirk Cameron, Riley Gaines, Dr. Del Tackett, Pastor Jack Hibbs, and more. Together we can stand for biblical value, so be sure to make your voice heard this election season. To watch the videos, to get the voter guide, all you have to do is go to drjamesdobson.org/countdown-to-decision-decision-2024. And also remember that the Dobson Culture Center has been created to help families and individuals engage culture with a biblical worldview and to encourage you to live boldly as a believer. Now, you can visit the Dobson Culture Center by clicking the Culture Center link on our homepage at drjamesdobson.org.

While you're there, you can also sign up to receive the free Lighting Up Culture Weekly report drafted each week by Owen Strachan, the senior director of the DCC. And finally, this reminder that Family Talk is a listener-supported broadcast outreach. It's important that we hear from you with your comments, your questions, your prayer requests, and also your faithful financial support as well. Please drop us a line when you go to drjamesdobson.org. You can make a secure donation online there. You can also make your contribution over the phone when you call 877-732-6825. While I'm Roger Marsh, thanks so much for making Family Talk a part of your day, 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.