



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Average Joe: The Coach Joe Kennedy Story – Part 2

Guest(s): Joe Kennedy

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Dr. James Dobson: Welcome, everyone, to Family Talk. It's the 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 back to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, and today we are once again joined by our guest, Coach Joe Kennedy. Now, you may know him as the high school football coach who lost his job simply for the "crime" of praying silent prayers after football games. Joe Kennedy is a former Marine turned high school football coach. He found himself in the midst of a legal battle that made it all the way to the Supreme Court, simply for taking a knee, bowing his head at the midfield stripe, that's the 50 yard line, and offering a silent prayer. Gary Bauer, our senior vice president of public policy here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, will continue his conversation with Coach Kennedy as he'll share more about what he went through and how it has affected his life, especially his marriage.

By the way, Coach Joe Kennedy's remarkable story has been made into a book called *Average Joe*, and now it's coming to the big screen. *Average Joe*, the movie, will be in theaters this Friday, and we encourage you to go see this outstanding and inspiring film. Coach Joe Kennedy is married to his lovely wife, Denise, and together they have four grown children. So without further ado, let's join Gary Bauer and Coach Joe Kennedy right here, right now, on Family Talk.

Gary Bauer: Welcome back to Family Talk. I'm Gary Bauer. It's great to be with you. Well, I hope you were tuning in yesterday, because you heard a great conversation with a man that is affectionately known as Coach Joe, the high school football coach that stood up in Washington State for religious liberty, fought an incredible battle that went all the way to the Supreme Court, won at the Supreme Court, and because of Coach Joe, you and your family and your children have stronger religious liberty now than any time in the last 50 years because of the Supreme Court decision that was made as the result of Joe's case. So Joe, welcome back to Family Talk. Let's get right in it, because I know people want to hear the rest of the story.

Joe Kennedy: Awesome. Thanks for having me back and finishing this story, because I think it's important that all Americans understand every detail and every aspect of it.

Gary Bauer: Joe, there's actually studies on this among self-described atheists and agnostics, measurements of public involvement in the life of America is actually sky-high. If you use the measurement of registered to vote, regularly votes, talks to neighbors about issues, writes letters to the editor, you just keep going down the list, among atheists and agnostics, there's high involvement. And here we are in 2024 and doing our best to promote the idea of Christian citizenship, and Dr. Dobson still gets letters, I still get letters, from not only Christians sitting in the pews, but sometimes from pastors saying, "You guys, what are you doing? The Bible has nothing to do with politics." Well, our religious liberty and our other freedoms and the right to worship and all the rest of that ends up being settled in politics. Government's not going to save us, but government can certainly destroy us if we don't have the right people getting elected to office.

So I want to keep bringing up for our audience that Joe, Coach Joe, is a perfect example of how we believe Christians should proceed with life in America in 2024. It's not 1950, Christianity is not the default position of the American culture, and we're seeing more and more examples, Joe, of people like you. There's Riley Gaines, the college student from University of Kentucky, a champion swimmer, and all of a sudden, she found herself being forced to swim against men who claimed they were women, and she spent some time with us to talk to us about one night, as she was bemoaning her fate, it hit her that, wait a minute, why was she waiting for everybody else to stand up and do something about this? She was going to stand up, that that's what God wanted her to do, and now a whole movement has started, just like what you did literally ended up causing a change in the law of the United States, strengthening religious liberty.

Now, Joe, you mentioned that your wife played an integral role in bringing you to Christ. She was also not just a bystander in all of this, right? Tell us about the conflict, the contradiction your family found itself in, because both you and your wife worked at the school district.

Joe Kennedy: Right. Not only did we both work at the school district, we had kids in the high school, we had two kids in the high school, one in the middle school, so this was very much involved in our family, we were all in with Bremerton. And when we say that she worked for the school district, she was a human resource director for the school district, so you can imagine what her job was when this makes headline news that the praying coach is in a fight with the school district over this. She was thrown right into the middle of this, and she had wanted nothing to do with, and we almost got divorced over this whole entire thing, because she could not understand why the First Amendment and why standing up for our beliefs is so important to me. And finally, God came in at the right time, right at the last moment, and saved our marriage and opened her eyes to this is a fight, not just in the physical sense, this is a spiritual battle, and her eyes were opened to it.

So again, what they tried to make evil and tried to break apart has only made it stronger, and when we united with God, I tell you, everything changed and we knew we were going to make it.

Gary Bauer: What a dramatic tale, Joe, that you were doing this good thing, this right thing, but in our country today, as it becomes more secular and there's more aggressive efforts to limit the freedom of speech, and without the freedom of speech, you can't have freedom of religion, you can't preach if you don't have freedom of speech, the freedom of assembly, you were defending a number of freedoms. Your wife sounds like a delightful lady, I look forward to meeting her someday. But she was feeling in her life all of this pressure for God to come alongside both of you at that moment and keep your marriage intact. That was another blessing in all of this battle you were in. If mama's not happy, nobody's happy, right?

Joe Kennedy: That is so true. Now, we also had not just that aspect of it, but we had the weight of the United States on our shoulders, because if the courts would've remained the way that they ruled, against us, in the first seven attempts that we had, could you imagine? We would've been the people that ended up losing the religious liberties for all Americans. So thank God we won, because I was more worried about what would happen if we ended up losing, we would've just messed it up for the entire country. So that was a big lift off of our shoulders when they ruled in our favor, for both my wife and for myself.

Gary Bauer: Well, and Joe, it's another reminder of Christian citizenship, because three of those six justices on the court had been appointed by President Trump and they had brutal confirmation battles, then they had to be voted on by United States senators who are also elected, and as a result of that, it gave this court, that was new in many ways, an opportunity to go back and correct some old really bad Supreme Court decisions. And so, it just shows how the Christian citizenship builds on itself, you've got Christians electing the right senators, Christians helping to elect the right president in that election cycle, and then you have these justices, many of whom are Christians themselves, and they end up standing with the Christian coach in Bremerton, Washington, and as a result, the country rededicates itself legally to one of the first liberties in the view of our Founding Fathers. I see God's hand all over this entire battle.

Joe Kennedy: I absolutely do. Now, when we were going through it, we didn't understand what it meant, because the only thing I asked for was to be able to be reinstated as a coach and to pray after a football game, that was my only ask. And it's really amazing that God had something else to say about that, and change, because of the prayers of the nation, turn it around to something good, where we have more religious freedom today than we've had in the past 50 years. That's nothing but a God moment there.

Gary Bauer: Yeah, that is exactly right, Joe. I've talked to a number of leading Christians who run some of these legal groups that defend religious liberty, and I've had a couple of those folks, and this is their lives, this is what they work in all the time,

and they have said exactly what you just said, that even though we've got a lot of problems, because of the judges and justices that have been put on the court five, six, seven years ago, and because of the courage of people like yourself, we now have this strong pro-religious liberty Supreme Court. That's an amazing thing.

I want to comment on something else, Joe, because you said that the whole weight of the government was coming down on you. The Justice Department here in Washington, D.C., good grief, I think there's probably 10,000 lawyers in that department. And for quite a few of the recent decade, the interim of the Trump-Pence years were an exception, but the years leading up to that and the years after that, that Justice Department, hundreds of those attorneys, sometimes thousands of those attorneys, have come to work every day with their number one goal not to get organized crime or not to go after drug dealers, but to go after, for example, the Little Sisters of the poor. For folks that aren't Catholic, the Little Sisters of the Poor are a group of little nuns that helped the poor, they're not a threat to the Republic.

But the previous administration before Donald Trump tried to make the Little Sisters of the Poor cover abortions for their staff, little Catholic nuns, and that case went all the way to the Supreme Court. And to think that high-powered lawyers that have graduated from Harvard and Yale, what, they would get up in the morning and say to their wife, their wife would say, or maybe their husband would say, "What kind of day have you got today?"

"Well, it's a great day. I'm going into the office and get those Little Sisters of the Poor," or, "I'm going to go into the office and get that Coach Joe that insists on praying on the football field."

The world is upside down, Joe, and you showed it clearly by courage. You're not a lawyer by training, but you had legal help from these various organizations, and did they explain during that process what was at stake here and why this was a chance to undo something that was called the Lemon Decision? Very aptly named, it's named the Lemon Decision because one of the people in it was named Lemon, but it was a lemon of a decision, because it ended up, in some ways, restricting religious liberty, and that's what ended up getting overturned by your case.

Joe Kennedy:

Yeah, and that was something I did not expect, nor did my attorneys even expect that. They've been trying for years, for the past 50 years, to get rid of Lemon, and I didn't know what Lemon was, most people will never hear what Lemon is. But there's been 7,000 cases over the past 50 years that has just squashed religious liberty because of this Lemon case. So the Supreme Court justices, what they did is they've reset the clock 50 years to back the way it was originally intended by the Constitution and our Founding Fathers to give the free exercise of freedom of speech, and they all work together, not in opposing forces.

So this was huge in more ways than myself and my lawyers even dreamed of happening, and nobody else could do that but God, that was amazing. And it's amazing what happens when people just stand up. We've been sitting as Christians in our house going, "That doesn't affect me, that doesn't affect me." Well, now everything affects you, and we miss a boat in our schools, in our churches, in our communities, in our government, we need to be able to stand up and fight for those things.

Gary Bauer: A friend of our ministry, Dr. Dobson's ministry, Eric Metaxas, has periodically said, "It's not enough for Christians to sit in their living rooms watching Fox News and eating their Chick-fil-A. That's not being involved and trying to make sure our country remains a free nation, built on the idea that liberty comes from God, not from Caesar, not from the government. We've got to get out there particularly at a time like this." So Joe, what was the low point for you? Was it when your wife was feeling such pressure and it was straining the relationship? Were you tempted that maybe somebody else should pick the fight here, maybe I need to retreat and take a second look at this, or did you just know deep in your soul that this was something God wanted you to do?

Joe Kennedy: I knew deep in my soul that this was the right thing to do with God and for our country as a Marine and a patriot, that's what my driving force was. But to be absolutely honest, every single day, I did not want to go through this. I sat there and said, "God, if there's any way that this cup could pass from me..." I didn't want this. I wanted to coach high school football, I wanted to live a good quiet life helping young men become better young men. I didn't want this fight, the school didn't want this fight, it's just something that needed to happen. And if it wasn't for the strength of God, I would've caved. He was my anchor and my root system that just kept me grounded the whole time, and I couldn't have done him without him, because I was weak in the flesh and wanted to quit.

Gary Bauer: Well, it would've been understandable, Joe, but I'm sure happy you didn't do it, because I think the new rules on religious liberty, they're going to be taught in law schools all over America now, as long as there's a majority in the court that supports the new improved religious liberty test, which is a test now because of you, that reflects what the Founding Fathers wanted in religious liberty. They put it in the First Amendment for a reason, because the right to seek God and worship God is a fundamental right. A society or a country that doesn't have that is unlikely to have many other liberties.

Periodically, there'll be a book, and I have reason to believe I'm going to be in the book in some way, maybe good or bad, and I go look at the book and I'm like, what are they going to say? And sometimes I'm happy and sometimes I'm not. What did you think when you first saw the movie, "Average Joe?" I always find it a little embarrassing when I even see a TV interview of myself. What did it feel like seeing somebody acting as if they're you and sharing the story that you actually lived?

Joe Kennedy: Yeah, it is. There's no other words except it is very weird. And who am I? Me and my wife just are everyday people, and now, all of a sudden, it's on the big screen. That's the weirdest feeling, and to see it, and it brings up so many emotions, because we're reliving all of our past and everybody is going to know our entire story of our lives, there's nothing that we are hiding from anybody. So as much as I want everything to just blow right over my head and I keep my head down and let God do his work, it is very odd, and it is kind of embarrassing many times to think that this is something big and that it's going to be a movie, that's weird. I wish I had a better way of saying it.

Gary Bauer: Weird's a good word. It's been used a lot in recent weeks, but weird will do. I can understand why that would be the description you would come up with. Now, were you able to consult with the people that produced the movie? Sometimes people will write a book, then they go see the movie and they don't recognize their book. Were you able to give input or to make sure they stayed on the accuracy and the power of the story that you lived with your own life?

Joe Kennedy: Yeah, a huge blessing was that the one who wrote the screenplay, Stephanie Katz, she was the one who also helped me write my book, so she was very intimate in the details of our lives and our families over the past eight years. And when we met the director, Harold Cronk, it was spectacular. And with Eric Close and Amy Acker, all of them, everybody on the set, everybody wanted to be true to our story and glorify the Lord and really tell the way that things really are instead of making it Hollywoodized. And we were on set, we helped with developing the script, so we were very much involved with it, and they kept it true to our lives, which is an entire blessing in itself.

Gary Bauer: So with the movie coming out this coming Friday, October 11th, I'm assuming you want to encourage anybody that's interested in America to go to the movie, but certainly Christians, going to this movie is, I think, from everything that I've seen, a great way to encourage American Christians to be bold, to stand up for the liberty that so many men and women have sacrificed for over the several hundred years of our country. And Joe, we're in an election year, and there's some big differences in candidates, all the way from the very top, the White House, down to the Congress, the whole Congress, whole House of Representatives, is up for reelection, a third of the Senate, and then you get down to state legislatures in some states, the governor in some states, local school boards that end up setting policy. You served in the military, defending the rights that Americans hold dear. Could you give a word of encouragement on why Christians particularly need to be registered to vote, look at the issues, and then go out and be guided by biblical principles? Because our rights are at stake in this year's elections.

Joe Kennedy: I just saw "God's Not Dead 5," and there was a shocking statistic in that where 40 million Americans that are Christians don't vote, and that just blows my mind. How are we supposed to be Americans if we're not involved in our communities, where we let other people dictate what our children are being taught, what is happening in our schools, in our local government? It goes all

the way to the top, and sitting by and letting other people make that decision... I tell you, I don't know the Bible hardly at all, but I am quite sure that nowhere in there does it say to turn a blind eye to the people around you and who leads you.

And they might talk about Caesar, well, Caesar got there for a reason, and we are letting people get into office because we're allowing it to happen. We need to be proactive and at least stand up for what we believe, and try to get the people that we think will exemplify our country and our God. That's our responsibility as Americans, not to hide and not get involved. We are supposed to be involved, that's what builds our country.

Gary Bauer:

Joe, I couldn't say it any better. That was a great testimony to Christian citizenship. I hope all of you listening in will take our time we've had with Coach Joe, with Average Joe, I hope you'll check out the movie coming to a big screen near you and go and listen to this story, watch this story. And if you're not registered to vote, folks, quite frankly, in a lot of states right now, early voting has begun, so you need to get registered to vote, then you need to study the issues, be discerning, because if we don't elect the right people, we will have betrayed our own founders, and we will have condemned our own children and grandchildren to lives of lesser freedom. So Joe, thanks for being a brave Marine, both in and out of uniform, thank you for being a Christian citizen and giving us an example. And I wonder if I could ask you to close this out with a prayer of whatsoever on your heart.

Joe Kennedy:

I'll do my best. Lord God, thank you for everything. There's no words to describe the power and the grace that you have. And if we just step into your word, and we just live according to your word, and just turn our eyes towards you, our country, we can become something great. I hope that this just empowers people, and that your light shines into their hearts, and we get to be that light for all Americans. God bless everybody in our country, and especially our elected leaders, and take care of the Dobsons, we love them, and everybody that's involved with their...God bless you all. Amen.

Roger Marsh:

Well, what a great prayer from today's guest here on Family Talk, Coach Joe Kennedy. I pray that we will all become more involved as Christian citizens here in the U.S. And if you enjoyed the program you've been listening to over the past couple of days, you're encouraged to share with a friend or family member who would also benefit from this wisdom. You can do so easily from the Family Talk app, or by visiting us at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. And while you're online with us, be sure you also learn more about Coach Joe Kennedy, his book entitled *Average Joe*, and if you love heartfelt movies, you'll definitely want to take the family to see "Average Joe," the movie, which will be in theaters starting this Friday.

Can you believe that we are less than a month away from election day? I can't either. Now, whether you plan to vote early or on November 5th, be sure to head to the polls and make your vote count. And if you're not sure who or what

to vote for, we've got excellent information waiting for you at our Countdown to Decision 2024 website. There, you can sign up to download a free voter guide, you can also watch episodes of our Countdown to Decision 2024 podcast. We also have reels from those interviews as well that are a little shorter, maybe easier to digest, and easier to share with friends as well.

New episodes are posted each and every week. Kirk Cameron, Riley Gaines, Dr. Del Tackett, Pastor Sammy Rodriguez, and more, are just some of the guests that we've featured on the Countdown to Decision 2024 podcast. Put your faith and patriotism into action by casting your vote on or before November 5th, and make sure you get informed before you go to the polls by going to drjamesdobson.org/countdown-to-decision-2024. Well, I'm Roger Marsh. Thanks so much for listening to Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love. We'll see you next time.

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

Roger Marsh: Hey everyone, Roger Marsh here. When you think about your family and where they will be when you're no longer living, are you worried? Are you confident? Are you hopeful? What kind of legacy are you leaving for your children and their children? Here at Family Talk, we're committed to helping you understand the legacy that you're leaving for your family. Join us today at drjamesdobson.org for helpful insights, tips, and advice from Dr. James Dobson himself. And remember, your legacy matters.