

We have gone so far down the road of political correctness that we've lost touch with what it means to be who we are. And we've scared ourselves into believing we can not be who we are in public without penalty. More and more, it seems like every comment is a verbal tightrope. I remember when I was a kid, the principal would come over to our house ... this is true ... I had a couple of wild brothers ... and he would flat-out tell my parents that their children were failing. But not any more. You can't use that word over a child any more. A child is not failing; he's passing impaired. Students with poor grades are now "knowledge-based non-possessors." Coaches can not tell kids they have smelly gym socks. They have "odor-retentive athletic footwear." Shy kids must be referred to as "conversationally selective." Good parents can no longer tell children that their room is messy for fear it may give them low self esteem. You can only say that their room is "passage impaired." And that your child, who refuses to do any work around the house, is not lazy but energetically disinclined.

We're not making sense any more. That's what today's message is about. It's about finding a sane response to our rights as faithful people. And to talk about that, we'll be using the example of prayer in public schools.

Let's remember together what the First Amendment says about our rights. The first statement of the Bill of Rights says, "*Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free expression thereof.*" This amendment is about protecting our rights as citizens to freely practice our faith without being coerced into any government-sponsored religion. No government agency can establish or give preference to one religion over another. And that's a good thing. Private citizens have the freedom to express our beliefs freely and to exercise our religious beliefs as we see fit. So the First Amendment is a protection, not for the government, but for the people.

That means that in government-sponsored institutions, like public schools, the First Amendment forbids religious activity sponsored by the administration ... but it protects religious activity initiated by private citizens. For example, teachers and other public school officials may not lead their classes in prayer, but students can. Our system of government is explicitly arranged to protect the individual right to be who you are.

Let's look at where the debate on prayer in public schools started:

- In **1782**, the U. S. Congress passed a resolution recommending the Bible for use in all schools.
- By the mid-**1800s**, the Catholic population in the U.S. had grown to the place where they were beginning to have a voice in the public square and they were particularly vocal about the use of the Protestant Bible in schools. So in 1843, Philadelphia's school board voted to allow Catholic students to leave the room when the Bible was being read or prayers were being offered. Protestants rioted over this choice, and thirteen people were killed. A few years later, a priest in Maine was tarred and feathered for opposing the use of the King James Bible in schools. This is the issue that birthed Catholic schools in America.
- Fast forward to June 25, **1962** and a court case in New York challenging prayer in public schools at the start of the school day. That case was the first of several to be brought to the courts in the coming year. And in this case, the court in New York decided against the practice of prayer in schools.
- In **1963**, a similar case was heard by the Supreme Court. Madelyn Murray-O-Hair filed a lawsuit against the Baltimore City Public School System, arguing that it was unconstitutional to require her son William to participate in Bible readings at his public school. The lawsuit made its way to the Supreme Court, which voted 8-1 in Murray's

favor, and that effectively ended the practice of required prayer and Bible readings in all public schools in the United States. Madelyn Murray-O’Hair became famous as an atheist after this vote, and was once called by *Time Magazine* the most hated woman in America. Interestingly, her son, William Murray ... the subject of the lawsuit ... is now a strong Christian ... who has written several Christian books ... one of them called *Let Us Pray: A Plea for Prayer in Public Schools*.

- In **1992**, another guy contested the use of prayer at graduation ceremonies, and he won.
- In **1993**, a court case in Texas established the right of *students* to initiate prayer, even at public ceremonies.
- And in **1998**, the Clinton administration established an official list of guidelines for acceptable religious expression in public schools. This document was actually the combined effort of (get this!) the government, the ACLU and the National Association of Evangelicals. That sounds almost like the start of a bad joke, but actually it is a useful document that does a great job of explaining the rights of students.

So legally ... what can students do at school? Students can:

- ***Pray*** ... before meals, before tests, with other students, in the school building, as part of student-led events. Here’s the deal, folks: students *can* pray in school. They just can’t be forced or required to pray. As long as there are tests, students *will* pray in school.
- ***read their Bibles***. They can carry a Bible on school property and have it on their desk.
- ***discuss their religious beliefs with friends*** ... at lunch, in the hallways, and even as part of classroom discussions as long as it is relevant. They can talk about their faith with anyone as long as they are not harassing people.
- ***express their beliefs in class and defend them on religious grounds***.
- ***express their beliefs in essays and artwork*** without penalty.

- *wear religious jewelry and t-shirts.*
- *host before- and after-school bible studies and prayer meetings on school property..*
- host events like “*see you at the pole.*”
- And they can *start religious clubs.*

So there are plenty of ways for students to share their faith on campus. Students, I challenge you to go nine for nine on this list at your school. If you were to master *this* list, there’s not a person on campus who wouldn’t know you follow Jesus. If *every* student were to go nine for nine on this list, it would change the climate of our schools.

Teachers can express their faith in the workplace, too. They can:

- *Pray with other teachers.* Steve prays every morning at his school with a group of teachers and administrators. They pray for each other, for the school and for the kids. I’ve been asked on multiple occasions to walk through a school building and pray over the rooms with an administrator or staff person. And that’s legal.
- *Pray for or even with students* when a student is open to that. Steve says that teachers at his school pray with students all the time.
- *Engage in religious activities held at school.* They can not host them, but they participate in student-led prayer groups, Bible studies and religious events held at school.
- *Teachers can have a personal Bible at school.*
- And *they can wear religious jewelry.*

If every Christian teacher and administrator were to do just these things, it would change the climate of a school. And a lot of this is transferrable. What students and teachers can do, most of us can do at work ... even at Fort Gordon. Remember: Our system of government is explicitly arranged to protect the individual right to be who you are. Of course, if you choose to

display your faith at work, you're also committing to following Jesus in your actions. Sort of like me putting a fish on the back of my car. I'm not sure that's a great witness for Jesus. We must count the cost of following before we commit. If you were to practice your First Amendment rights at school ... on the job ... would your life back you up?

So what can public schools do and what can they not do?

- ***Offer their buildings for religious meetings.*** We thank God for that, since that's where Mosaic started.
- ***Schools can teach about religion, but they can not teach religion.***
- ***They can teach various theories,*** including creationism, in comparative religion or social studies classes, but not in biology class.

So here's the bottom line. There is a lot of freedom for students and teachers to express their faith in a school environment. Students have never been told they can not pray or read their Bible at school. But they can't be *forced* to pray ... and this is a good thing.

Now ... now there is another argument out there ... that the downfall of our culture began the day children stopped praying in school. Remember that the Supreme Court made their final ruling in 1963 ... and in the next fifteen years, teenage pregnancies increased by 187%. Sexually transmitted disease increased by 226% over the next 12 years. Divorce rates increased by 300% over the next fifteen years. For eighteen years, after 1963, SAT scores declined. Is all this because children stopped reciting a prayer at school every morning? Some would say yes.

Gregory Koukl, a Christian apologist, says, "The rooster crows and the sun comes up. Does that mean the rooster causes the sun to come up? Because the sun comes up after the rooster crows,

does it mean that if we killed the rooster we'll be perpetually in darkness? The point is that just because one thing happens after another doesn't mean that the second is caused by the first. ... It may be that the thing that has caused our decline was not pulling prayer out of schools, but there is a third thing that caused both the decline and the pulling of prayer out of schools. The reason that's important," Koukl says, "is that if we try to fix the problem by putting prayer back into schools, and taking it out wasn't the thing that caused the problem, then we are kind of fixing the wrong part of a machine that's not working."

Koukl goes on to say that we have to decide which cross we're going to die on, and maybe *this* isn't the one worth all the time people put into it. As I think about the controversial issues we're working through, I'm not sure this is the one I would go to the mat for. It simply does not compare with issues like:

- ***The sacredness of human life.***
- ***Freedom***, which was clearly a core value for Jesus. When he announced his ministry and claimed his mission, he said (Luke 4:18) - *The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.* If that's what matters to Jesus, then that's what ought to matter to us. We ought to be committed to preaching freedom from the things that hold people back and keep them down.
- ***Family*** matters. Paul said (1 Timothy 5:8 - NIV) - *If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.* Ephesians 6:4 says - *Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.* See ... issues that teens struggle with are not going to be solved by a minute of silence at school. They are not going to be solved by a teacher reading a passage from the Bible. The strongest influence on a child is his

parent. And I don't want the government undermining what I've done to bring my child into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. I count on the constitution to protect my right to teach my child to follow Jesus.

I've said this before and I think it bears repeating: The *spiritual* education of our children does not belong in the public school classroom. Why? Because unless the Bible is taught as *Living Word*, it is taught irresponsibly. If the Bible is taught only as history or comparative literature, that does more harm than good. If the examples are teachers who don't walk the walk, that does more harm than good. The gospel message is a pearl of great price. Why would we leave something that valuable to a stranger in a public school? As parents ... not only biological parents but spiritual parents of the children around us ... we should be the ones to teach our children about God and Jesus and the Bible. And we should be the ones to model prayer for them. And then ... as the Word says ... when they are old they will not depart from it.

So if parents are the strongest influence, what can they do to lead children in the way that leads to righteousness? **Parents can:**

- ***Pray for your children.*** Get in the habit of praying for a child every day ... if not yours, then whatever child God has placed in your life. Pray for your children. I can not stress this enough. Our pastor in Kentucky tells the story of a time when his mother was awakened in the middle of the night with an urge to get on her knees and pray for her son. She had no idea why, but she couldn't escape the feeling so she got down on her knees and prayed for a couple of hours. In those same hours, her son was on the other side of the world in the middle of one of the worst battles of the Vietnam war. God uses the prayers of parents.

- ***Pray with your children.*** Prayer is the most intimate thing we can do in our homes, and this is the strongest possible influence you can have over your child. Pray with them. Teach them to pray by your example and let them hear your heart in that place of prayer.
- And if your children won't pray with you, ***pray in front of them.*** Our daughter was never a huge fan of our family prayers, but every night she knew that if she sat in our bed long enough, she'd be part of our prayer time together. And even if she didn't pray, we still prayed.
- ***Teach them the Bible.*** Deuteronomy 6:6-7 says - *These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.* Do your children see you with your Bible? Do they see it as a value for you?
- ***Pray for your child's school and for their teachers.*** Rather than complaining, pray. And organize other parents to pray. Last year, Greenbrier parents organized a prayer walk around the high school. And that's legal.
- ***Be engaged in what they are learning and talk to them about how their lessons compare with your beliefs.*** Remember that *you* are the greatest influence on your child. Your influence is greater than that of their teachers or peers. So if you can filter what they are learning through your conversations at home, they *will* know your values.
- And most importantly, ***live your faith at home.*** With children, it is so true that what you do matters so much more than what you say. Let your life speak. Show them by your example that their relationship to God is important. Pray with them before they go out at night. Pray with them before they take a test. Pray with them about their issues with friends. It matters.

Here's where I'd to end our worship together today. I'd like to practice together what we've just talked about. I want to invite you to pray together in small groups. We are going to model

the life of prayer for the students in the room ... and in the process, I believe we are going to make a dent in the darkness through our prayers.

In a moment, I'm going to invite you to stand together in groups of four or five and then I'm going to give you a few points to pray over together. I'm going to trust that there is at least one person in your group willing to pray aloud so that if you're not comfortable with that, you can still be in the group and agree in prayer even if you don't pray out loud.

So ... would you get into groups of four or five now? Then I'll give you a couple of ideas to get you started.

I want to invite you to pray in your group for:

- our students
- our teachers and administrators
- our schools
- and our families.

You may have one person pray for all these things, or you may decide to share in the prayer together with a different person taking each point. Please feel free to put names to these points. If there is a teacher or student or family in your life that needs prayer, pray for them by name.

And we will trust that God will use these prayers to do some amazing things in our students, our schools and our families.