

THE MISSING SUBJECT IN OUR SCHOOLS

By Dr. Rick Perrin on the occasion of *Back to School Sunday* from Psalm 119:9-16 and 33-48
“Teach me your statutes.” Psalm 119:12

The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals--the court that declared the Pledge of Allegiance unconstitutional because it contains the phrase, “under God”—recently ordered that seventh graders in California public schools must observe a three week Islamic Awareness course. Students would adopt Muslim names, wear Muslim clothes, give up candy and TV for Ramadan, memorize suras from the Koran, profess the Muslim faith, and recite Islamic prayers that begin, “In the name of Allah.” The guy behind the course, Abdurahman Alamoudi, spent time in prison in 2003 for funneling money to Islamic terrorist groups in Syria, certified Muslim chaplains for the U. S. military, and was an advisor on Islamic matters to Sen. Hillary Clinton.

What a reversal! When I was in seventh grade school began every morning with a reading from the Bible and a prayer, usually the Lord’s Prayer. That came to a screeching halt in 1963 when a majority of justices on the United States Supreme Court ruled that Bible reading and prayer were unconstitutional in America’s public schools. I still remember how strange it was when I began my junior year in high school and there was only silence where the Word of God had been read only three months before.

In those days everyone in America knew the Bible. Now, a little more than a generation later, almost no one does. For example, according to recent polls, more than ten percent of Americans believe that Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife. Only half of our fellow citizens can name even one of the Four Gospels. Only one in three knows who delivered the Sermon on the Mount. Less than half can name the first book of the Bible. Seventy-five percent of adults believe the Bible teaches that “God helps them that help themselves.” It was Benjamin Franklin who said that. Lest you are feeling a bit smug, allow me to tell you that Evangelicals, who traditionally take the Bible seriously, came in at about the same levels.

Forty-four years: That’s what happens when we fail to teach the Word of God to our children. Please turn with me to Psalm 119. Psalm 119 is the longest psalm in the Bible. It goes on and on, so we’ll consider only a portion of it! We’ll look at three things about God’s Word and the conditions we face in our culture. **1. What have we lost? 2. What is there to gain? And 3. What can we do?** Let’s begin with verses 9-11.

1. What have we lost? The psalmist points to three things we lose when we forget the Bible. The first, in verse 9, is that we lose our purity. “*How can a young man keep his way pure?*” he asks. “*By keeping it according to Your word.*” Have you checked out the television programs geared to teen audiences, the movies they see, MySpace and YouTube on the internet and read the things kids talk about with each other? Have you paged through the magazines published for young people? Or listened to mothers of young daughters complain that they can’t find appropriate clothes for their little girls to wear that don’t accentuate what is sensuous? It’s all about sex and more sex—or so it seems. That’s not saying that everything out there is inappropriate, but it

sure is hard to keep your mind and your actions pure when our culture has shoved us into a free fall toward our baser instincts and desires. Take away God's standards, and we have nothing left to hold onto.

Second, the psalmist says when the Bible is lost we wander. Verse 10 says, "*Do not let me wander from your commandments.*" One of the disturbing problems in education these days is cheating. Ask the teachers. As for the rest of society it's the rare person who doesn't resort to lying when he thinks it will benefit him. You needn't look for an Enron. I talked with a businessman last week who told me how people have forsaken commitments made to his company, and it's cost him thousands of dollars. God's word alone holds cements us to our foundations. Third, when the Bible is gone we fall into sin. Verse 11 says, "*Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I might not sin against you.*" Students headed back to Virginia Tech for the first time since the massacre there last Spring. In our own community we are experiencing the spreading horror of gang violence. People laughed about it when we warned five years ago that it was coming. They aren't laughing now.

A woman walked up to a little old man sitting in a rocking chair on his porch. His face was wrinkled, his hair wispy, his mouth sunken because of rotting and missing teeth. "What's your secret for a long and happy life?" she asked. The old man replied, "I smoke three packs of cigarettes a day, drink a case of whiskey each week, eat fatty foods, and never exercise." The woman was impressed. How old are you?" she asked. "Twenty-six," he said. The Psalmist understands and he pleads with God in verse 12, "*Teach me your statutes.*" The subject missing from our schools today is the Word of God. Whether we realize it or not, we miss it greatly, and we need it badly.

2. What is there to gain? Let's zip through verses 33-40 and observe just a few of the benefits that we derive when we teach God's Word. There are many listed in this psalm, so this is just a sample. First of all, God's Word gives us a guide for all of life. Verse 33 says, "*Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I shall observe it to the end.*" Have you watched parents of small children patiently teaching their kids things to keep them safe? I've talked with some first time parents who are worried that the first word their child learns to say is, "No!" But that's actually not a bad thing. It means that the parent is setting limits. But we all know what happens when kids reach teenagerhood. They start saying "No!" to their parents and "Yes!" to their peers. That's not as destructive as rumor has it, but when they enter adulthood young people must make their own decisions about how they will live and the standards they will keep. The world of their parents can seem awfully out of date. However, if we teach our children the Word of God they carry with them an inner standard that applies through the years. The Bible has something to teach at every age and in every circumstance.

The second benefit of teaching the Word of God is that we instill an inner control. We call it conscience. Verse 34 says, "*Give me understanding that I may observe Your law, and keep it with all my heart.*" If people have no conscience eventually society must impose external restraints. A healthy conscience is a prerequisite for human freedom. Third, the Word of God allows us to enjoy satisfaction with life. Verse 35 says, "*Make*

me walk in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it.” Since God created us he knows how we function and what will really make us happy. He gave his commandments for our welfare. What happens if you try to pursue every and any desire you may have? Ask Paris Hilton. Her unrestrained pursuit of pleasure led her straight to jail. She may not have learned the lesson yet. The really happy and contented people in the world are those who live within the limits God’s Word sets.

Fourth, the Word of God allows for honesty in our dealings with one another. Verse 36 says, *“Incline my heart to Your testimonies, and not to dishonest gain.”* I was reading an article last week about how China is riddled with corruption. No business deal is concluded without a bribe or a kickback. It’s become so bad and so blatant that it may jeopardize the 2012 Olympics scheduled for Beijing. Bring it closer to home. It seems like every product we import from China is being recalled. Pet food kills our dogs. Fisher Price toys made in China kill our children. Chinese automobile tires kill you. A functioning society requires honesty in people’s dealings with one another. Fifth, God’s Word brings us value that lasts. Verse 37 says, *“Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity, and revive me in Your ways.”* Vanity is stuff that is a waste of time. Have you watched Antiques Road Show? People bring to the experts things they have found in their attics hoping that what they’ve been saving may turn out to have immense value. The program doesn’t show you the junk people have saved. I’m a junk saver. I’ve got more worthless stuff sitting around because maybe I might need it some day. Barb’s mom was just the opposite. I never saw a neater attic than hers. Barb says we’d be rich if she had just kept some of the things she threw out. Think about your life. What expert can you go to who will tell you what to keep and what to throw out? The Bible. Jesus said we should store up treasure in heaven. God’s Word tells you what that treasure is.

Sixth, God’s Word leads us to have reverence for God. Verse 38 says, *“Establish Your word to Your servant, as that which produces reverence for You.”* Why is reverence for God important? Because only when God holds first place in our lives can we find the proper perspective for everything else. If God isn’t first, something or someone else will take that place. Who or what will it be? You? You know people who live only for themselves. They’re not very attractive, are they? On the other hand, we honor those who help others. We admire firefighters or soldiers who offer their lives to rescue or defend the weak and needy. Why should they do that if there is no God? Why would anyone not put himself first if God does not exist? We need reverence for God if society is going to have any redeeming virtue. Seventh, the Word of God enables us to gain honor for ourselves. Verse 39 says, *“Turn away my reproach which I dread, for Your ordinances are good.”* Thomas Ravenel threw away the respect of the people of our state and trashed what might have been a significant political career for cocaine. Michael Vick has thrown away his pro-football career and his fortune for the perverted pleasure of betting on dog fighting. People gamble that they’ll never face reproach for their sins. But they do. How much better to receive honor. How does honor come? Inevitably it’s by obeying God’s Word. And we believe that virtue will be honored—if not today, then tomorrow.

And then, finally, there's righteousness. Verse 40 says, "*Behold, I long for Your precepts. Revive me through Your righteousness.*" Righteousness makes you feel good. It makes you feel clean. Have you ever been ashamed by something you said or did? Did you like that feeling? Is your memory clogged by things you wish you could forget? God will forgive us if we turn to him. Jesus went to the cross and died to pay for the sins of sinners like you and me. If we turn from our sin and place our faith in him, God makes us clean. He credits to our account the righteousness of Christ so that we are made acceptable to him. Righteousness is a gift that we receive by God's grace. The only guide that will lead you to righteousness is the Word of God.

Do you see? Do you understand? When we teach God's Word to our children, everyone receives benefits. You do. Your husband or wife does. Your kids do. Their husbands or wives will. Their children will. Your neighbors and friends will. Even the world does. Jesus talked about how Christians are called to be salt and light in the world. Salt preserves. Light banishes the darkness. Instead of decay and stumbling in the darkness, desire what is whole and beautiful and is a pleasure to see in broad daylight. God's word is so valuable! We've seen what we've lost. We've seen what we can gain. Now we must ask,

3. What can we do? It's obvious that our public schools are not going to teach the Bible. Court decisions have made that impossible. Conditions are hostile to God's Word and things we could do only a few years ago are prohibited now. For example, I recall how when I was a boy, representatives from the Gideons visited our classroom and handed out small Bibles to every student. Today Gideons are not even permitted to stand on school property, and with most kids riding busses, there is simply no way they can put the Bible into the hands of our students. An alternative is released time Bible education. Cornerstone participates in this. During elective class periods students may select with their parent's permission, an off-campus Bible class. It's all legal. If you'd be interested or willing to teach or help with one of these Bible classes, we'll be glad to tell you how you may be involved. Released time is probably the best and most effective option we have available for us today. But in verses 41-46 the psalmist suggests several other practical things you and I can do.

First, we can pray for God's help. Verse 41 says, "*May your lovingkindness also come to me, O Lord.*" All of Psalm 119 is a prayer. Reasoning with people isn't sufficient because there is a spiritual resistance against God's Word. People don't really want the Bible telling them what to do, even if it will benefit them. They'll tell you the Bible has errors. We must be sensitive to other people's religious beliefs, they'll say. We should teach the Koran also. The school district will get sued. And so on. Sin by definition is resistance to God. People are sinners. So you and I must pray that God will open up avenues for his Word, and that he'll open up hearts to receive it.

Second, we can propose practical answers to social problems. Notice in verse 41 that the psalmist prays for God's lovingkindness and for salvation. He says in verse 42, "*I shall have an answer for him who reproaches me.*" The psalmist knows that he's going to get opposition. People are going to resist God's Word. Yet we can slip around

the defensiveness by proposing answers to the problems people face. I did this in our school district for several years. For example, people are concerned about teenage drinking, drug abuse, and sexual activity. I and others took Biblical principles and created ways the community could minister to kids and their families who hurt because of their sons' and daughters' choices. When my sons were in junior high, the school they were attending in another city held an informational meeting to explain the sex-ed curriculum to parents. I asked the teacher, "If a student asks you for advice on whether to have sex, What do you tell them?" The teacher said, "We tell them to behave responsibly." I replied, "There is not one good thing that comes from a teenager having sex. Not one good thing. Can't you as a responsible adult say to that child, 'Don't do it. It's a bad choice'?" She had nothing to say. When we moved to Irmo, we took that approach when we revised the district's sex education curriculum and created the Community Roundtable. We want to help students make the best choices they can. God's Word offers solutions, and you don't even have to say it is God's Word!

Finally, third, we can promote righteousness. Verse 46 says, "*I will also speak of Your testimonies before kings, and shall not be ashamed.*" This is talking about the personal influence you have with people in authority. You know people who have influence. Perhaps it's a teacher. Teachers shape how their students think. Encourage a teacher you know to endorse the Word of God in his classroom. Or, perhaps the principal of a school is your friend. Or maybe you know the superintendent or a school board member. A carefully placed word here and there may carry great impact. I've personally told local officials that I will put whatever prestige or influence I may possess on the line and back them up when they do what is right. Officials can only do what the community allows them to do. A few years ago the principal of Irmo High School made a courageous decision to cancel a concert by a group whose songs and behavior tear down high moral standards. The principal was a Christian brother and he was getting a lot of criticism from the community. As I was driving past the high school I decided on the spur of the moment to stop and leave a message of support. Instead I ran into a TV news crew with their cameras, looking for people to interview about the controversy. I found myself saying to all of Columbia, "The principal has done the right thing, and I and many others are behind him." The principal had applied God's Word without saying it was God's Word. He had the courage to do it because he knew he wasn't alone. You have similar opportunities if you look for them.

The Word of God may be missing from our schools and we may not be able to change that much. But you and I as Christians can nevertheless bring God's Word into the public square in such a way that it has an impact on individuals, influences society, and brings God's blessings to many. Let's be bold.

Preached by Dr. Rick Perrin on August 26 2007 at Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, 5637 Bush River Road, Columbia SC 29212, and Dutch Fork High School Tel. 803-772-1000
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