

Coach Wins Supreme Court Case over Prayer

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a Washington school district was wrong to punish a high school football coach for praying on the field after games. The court ruled 6-3 that the Bremerton School District discriminated against Coach Joe Kennedy.

Justice Neil Gorsuch delivered the court's opinion, joined by Chief Justice John Roberts and Justices Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, Amy Coney Barrett, and Brett Kavanaugh.

"Kennedy prayed during a period when school employees were free to speak with a friend, call for a reservation at a restaurant, check email, or attend to other personal matters. He offered his prayers quietly while his students were otherwise occupied. Still, the Bremerton School District disciplined him anyway," wrote Gorsuch.

"Both the Free Exercise and Free Speech Clauses of the First Amendment protect expressions like Mr. Kennedy's. . . . The Constitution and the best of our traditions counsel mutual respect and tolerance, not censorship and suppression, for religious and nonreligious views alike."

In response to the opinion, Kennedy says, "This is just so awesome. All I've ever wanted was to be back on the field with my guys. I am incredibly grateful to the Supreme Court, my fantastic legal team, and everyone who has supported us. I thank God for answering our prayers and sustaining my family through this long battle."

Kelly Shackelford, president, CEO, and chief counsel for First Liberty, a religious liberty law firm that represented Kennedy, hailed the court's decision as a "tremendous victory for Coach Kennedy and religious liberty for all Americans."

“Our Constitution protects the right of every American to engage in private religious expression, including praying in public, without fear of getting fired,” she adds. “We are grateful that the Supreme Court recognized what the Constitution and law have always said—Americans are free to live out their faith in public.”

A devout Christian, Kennedy had a practice of going to the 50-yard line after high school football games and praying, often with fans and students joining him. In 2015, the school district suspended him for praying on the field after games and later decided not to renew his contract because of his refusal to stop praying on the field. Kennedy sued the school district in 2016, accusing them of violating his religious freedom.

Dave Kubal, president and CEO of Intercessors for America (IFA), says, “I am pleased that the Court finds the First Amendment protects the speech of people of faith and the right to express that faith through personal public prayer.

“As the nation’s largest prayer ministry, we at IFA are encouraged by the Court’s recognition that our freedom of personal public prayer is equal to the freedom of any secular speech . . . and that the government cannot punish or suppress those who express that right.”

MICHAEL GRYBOSKI, adapted from Christian Post and Intercessors for America.

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