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# September 11: Three Lessons Inspired by Providence

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I'm here to speak to you today about the lessons of September 11. What can we learn from this horrific event? There are, I think, three very important lessons.

The first lesson is that there is evil—real evil—in the world. For many years, we've lived a pretty comfortable life here in America. We've been prosperous, safe, and secure. Generally, we've worried about things like what we're going to do on Saturday night, and how hard the French test on Monday is likely to be.

We've read history books, of course, so we know about the many dreadful events of the past. We know about Hitler and Attila the Hun, but they seem so far away. In recent years, many of us have come to assume that evil doesn't really exist any more—that our world has somehow evolved beyond it, or at the very least, that it can't touch us here in America. September 11 reminded us that evil is very real. It reminded us that evil resurfaces in history on a regular basis, and comes

crashing in on our assumptions about what life should be like in our civilized world in 2003.

You might think, after the film you just saw, that this lesson—that evil is real and in the world today—would be etched indelibly in every American’s mind. Unfortunately, that’s not so. Today, there are still some Americans who find it hard to accept that evil is real.

In fact, these people can get very upset if you use the word evil to describe Osama bin Laden, or the terrorists who blew up the United Nations headquarters in Iraq a couple of weeks ago, and killed many of the relief workers who were trying to bring food and health care to suffering Iraqis.

People who don’t believe in “evil”—who don’t like the word—are called “moral relativists,” for a reason I’ll explain in a minute. Let me tell you first what moral relativists tend to say about September 11. Essentially, they say that men like Osama bin Laden are not really evil, but misunderstood. We should not use violence to defend ourselves against such people, say the moral relativists. Instead, we need to accept that they are different from us, and try to understand and even tolerate their differences. Bin Laden and Al-Qaida and other terrorists, they say, don’t like certain things Americans have done, certain things about the way we live. As a result, we need to sit down and talk with people like them. We need to try to communicate better, clear up misunderstandings, and consider changing our own behavior.

You might say, How could people believe this? After all, Osama bin Laden has called for death for infidels—that is, for all those who do not follow his brand of radical Muslim faith. In a tape released yesterday, bin Laden amplified on that threat. He declared that he and his followers would “bury the Americans.” “The real battle has not yet started,” he proclaimed. “Those who don’t agree with the killing, let them step out of the way.” Such people, bin Laden made clear, deserve only to live in “pits and holes.”

When Osama bin Laden makes threats like this, how can moral relativists continue to insist that Americans should deal with terrorists by changing our own behavior, or simply by trying to understand them better? They say this, I think, because they start with a certain assumption about human life: there is no universal truth, nothing that’s right or wrong for everyone. In other words, there is no right or wrong that people all over the world can reason about together and agree on. Instead, moral relativists say, the world is full of many cultures, and all of them have their own truths, which others may not share. In short, all morality is relative; there is no morality that is absolute. So when we encounter people who are different from us, we mustn’t judge them. Instead, we must try to understand them.

Take democracy, the moral relativists say. We Americans like democracy, but that doesn’t mean that it’s the best system of government for everyone. The main reason we like democracy may well be that we’re used to it.

I think most Americans disagree with the moral relativists. Most Americans know that Osama bin Laden doesn't just misunderstand us; he hates us and all we represent. Americans realize that bin Laden and America hold two competing visions of truth, of how man should live—two visions that simply cannot peacefully coexist. Moreover, most Americans know that—far from valuing tolerance, as the moral relativists do—Osama bin Laden sees tolerance as a sign of great weakness.

The fact remains, however, that moral relativists are very influential in our society today. Many journalists are moral relativists, and so are many people who write school textbooks. That's why I think the first lesson of September 11—that evil is real—is so important for Americans. It shows that the moral relativists are wrong.

Here's the second lesson of September 11. If we want to prevent another September 11—another horrific slaughter of innocents—we must be prepared to defend America against those who would harm her. It won't just be soldiers and FBI agents who keep America strong and free. It will be all of us, all American citizens.

So here's the question: how can we prepare ourselves to defend America and our way of life effectively? The first thing we need to do might sound kind of odd. We need to hit the books, so we know what we're defending. We need to know why America is so special, so exceptional—what makes it worth our sacrifice, our vigilance, and our love.

Now you might say, oh, I know all about America. I've been an American all my life.

But did you know that on a test two years ago—a test of 30,000 students across the country in grades four, eight, and twelve—kids knew less about America's government and history than they did about any other subject? (They were tested on a number of subjects, like science, reading and math.) In fact, almost two-thirds of the high school seniors tested didn't know many of the most basic facts about American history. On another test at some of our nation's best colleges, 99 percent of students knew who the rapper Snoop Doggy Dogg was. But only 22 percent knew that it was Abraham Lincoln who called America a government "of the people, by the people, for the people" in his Gettysburg Address. These are perhaps the most famous words ever used to describe America's system of government.

So what do we need to know to understand why America is unique, so worthy of our loyalty and love? First, we should know that America is the only nation in the world that's founded on ideas, and not on factors like ethnic heritage, language, or religion. We call these ideas the American Creed. Remember, the word "creed" comes from Latin *credo*—"I believe."

Let's name some of the ideas in the American Creed. First is equality. We believe that the law should treat everyone equally, whether that person is a homeless person or the president of General Motors. The second idea is

liberty. We believe that all human beings should be free to speak and write as they wish, to gather with the people they wish to associate with, and to practice the religion they wish.

A third idea is majority rule, minority rights. In our democracy, the majority makes political decisions, but it can't do whatever it wants. For example, the people in my town can't vote to take my house and give it to someone they think deserves it more. In America, what the majority can do is limited by the rights of the individual. This—like the other notions I've just described—is an extremely important idea.

Where do we find the ideas of the American Creed, which are so rare in history? They are enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the *Federalist Papers*, and speeches like the Gettysburg Address. At Providence Academy, you study these documents with care so you will come to understand the great gift—the great trust—that you've been given as an American citizen.

The second thing we need to know to protect and defend our heritage is the dramatic story of the great men and women who took the ideas of the American Creed and made them a reality. I'm talking about the people who designed the institutions—the three branches of government, the free market economy, for example—that make our democracy work. George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Teddy Roosevelt: these individuals and others like them made America the land of the free and the home of the

brave. They made it a nation that has drawn tens of millions of immigrants to our shores over the past 200 years.

I've said we need to know America's story to defend our heritage, but that story doesn't start in 1776 or even 1492. To really understand the roots of the American Creed—where its ideas came from—you must go back over 4,000 years.

Let's take an example. Remember Alexander the Great, the Greek who conquered the world in around 330 B.C.? What could he possibly have to do with America? Remember that Alexander conquered Persia, a great empire that was then the most powerful country on earth. When Alexander's men marched into Persia, they saw something that shocked them. In the court of the Persian king, Darius, everyone—even the richest men of Persia, even the king's most powerful generals—had to prostrate himself on ground before Darius as if he were a god.

The Greeks, down to lowest infantryman, found this disgusting. Even then, Greeks believed fervently in a kind of equality. Greek soldiers greeted their commanders, and even Alexander, with a military salute. Alexander's high commanders even greeted him with a kiss of comradeship. Ancient Greece—and the Israel of the Old Testament—were the cradle of the equality and democracy that we enjoy today in America.

Just as we must know where our ideas of liberty and equality came from, we must know how America and other free nations have defended democracy throughout history in the face of dire

threats. We cannot judge which policies will strengthen democracy today, and which will undermine it, unless we know how America conducted recent battles for freedom—with Hitler in World War II, for example, or with the Soviet Union and Communism during the fifty-year Cold War.

Here's the final lesson of September 11. If we want to equip ourselves to defend freedom, we must become a certain sort of people. We must develop certain qualities of character. The film you just saw focused on the heroic leadership of New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani. You saw what a difference his leadership made during the dark days following September 11, 2001. You know, too, about the bravery and devotion to duty of New York City's police officers and firefighters,

and about the thousands of New Yorkers who refused to panic, and sacrificed to save others.

On September 11, 2003, we should all dedicate ourselves to becoming the kind of citizen that a democracy needs to survive and flourish. Democracies need citizens who are courageous, loyal, generous, responsible, honest, hard-working, and just. They need patriots, who are devoted to the common good. And we should all remember that we don't study George Washington, John Adams, and Abraham Lincoln just so we can answer test questions about what they did in 1789 or 1865. We study them so we can learn to be like them—so we can carry on the sacred trust that they bequeathed to us. ■