



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Freedom to Stand – Part 1

Guest(s): Wes Modder

Air Date: July 1, 2024

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Dr. James Dobson: Welcome everyone to Family Talk. It's a 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 to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. Now, the episode you're about to hear was originally recorded several years ago. You'll remember the case of Navy Chaplain Wes Modder, who was fired for committing the crime of doing his job. His story is one of political correctness run amok, and yet Dr. Modder remained faithful to God and eventually was exonerated. Wes Modder has since gone home to be with the Lord. He passed away at the age of 55 in 2021.

Now, let's join our own Dr. James Dobson as he introduces more about today's guest, right here on Family Talk. Doctor?

Dr. James Dobson: Well, ladies and gentlemen, I'm James Dobson, your host for Family Talk, and I want to introduce you to a man that I consider to be a military hero and a man that I admire greatly for reasons that you will soon understand. His name is Dr. Wes Modder, and this is his history today. We're going to let you know who he is and where he's been.

He joined the Marine Corps in 1984, and he was a sergeant in Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm. Dr. Modder gave his heart to Jesus Christ and later was commissioned as a U.S. Navy chaplain in the year 2000. He holds a master's degree in divinity from Bethel Theological Seminary and a Doctor of Ministry from Fuller Theological Seminary in 2014.

Let me tell you why I said he is a military hero. It's not just the things he accomplished, but those are important too as a distinguished career as a chaplain. "His past Marine and Navy SEAL commanders called him a national asset with charismatic leadership," these are quotes, "sound judgment, and the appropriate confidence and diplomacy to speak to the entire chain of command," quote, "making him the best of the best of Navy chaplains."

He spent several years providing spiritual counsel to Navy SEALs, and he even received a letter of commendation from the head of the Navy Special Warfare Command. In 2014, at the personal request of a four-star general, Chaplain

Modder was assigned to the Naval Nuclear Power Training Command, where he faithfully provided support, counsel, and spiritual encouragement to his fellow sailors.

There's a whole lot more that we could say, but there's a whole lot more to this man than his military career, and I want you to hear from him personally. I heard Dr. Modder speak several months ago. I was sitting out there in the audience, and I leaned to my colleagues here and I said, "We have to let people hear his story." Welcome Dr. Modder, who is now out of the Marine Corps, out of the military, and is a pastor to a growing congregation.

Welcome. It's good to have you here.

Wes Modder: Thank you, Doctor. It's a pleasure to be here.

Dr. James Dobson: You have now resigned from the military after 21 years.

Wes Modder: Yes, sir.

Dr. James Dobson: And you ran into some bumps in the road along the way.

Wes Modder: I did.

Dr. James Dobson: Let's go back to the early days and let you tell your story.

Wes Modder: I was, as you stated, requested to go to the Navy Nuclear Power Training Command, where there was some difficulty there with the students and the testing that made some national news. At first, I really didn't want to go. But as you know, in the military you-

Dr. James Dobson: You go where you're told.

Wes Modder: ... you go where you're told. You get orders, and that's typically how it works. So I took my wife and four children cross country from San Diego to Charleston, South Carolina.

Dr. James Dobson: What rank were you then?

Wes Modder: Lieutenant commander, so I would be considered a senior lieutenant commander about to pick up commander.

Dr. James Dobson: And a chaplain.

Wes Modder: And a chaplain. Yes, sir. A chaplain is both a chaplain and an officer while serving on active duty. So I arrived, and everything seemed to be going just fine. Them not having a chaplain, they actually tracked what happens to the morale of the environment when you don't have a chaplain.

This was a very unique command, large command of 4,500 students and 900 staff. It's a premier school in the Navy. That's where typically sailors went after A School. They would go to this training command where you're putting officers and enlisted people on Navy nuclear submarines. This is the Navy nuclear ... This is a significant school.

So I was glad to be there, be their chaplain, fulfilling God's call in my life and executing my orders, three-year orders that I had there. And then I had a young officer who worked for me, who asked a lot of questions, and who's still currently serving. They were questions that were a bit challenging. They were outside the lines of what I would hold to be truth when it comes to faith and family and marriage. So he would work for me.

At this point, I'm having a lot of gay people, homosexual people coming into the military because the Don't Ask, Don't Tell has been lifted. So I'm finding myself as a minister, as a chaplain, talking to a lot of people who had very different views than me, and I thought I was doing quite well, actually. I would pray, talk to the Lord, tell them how good it is that they love one another. I would try to find common ground, but actually what they were looking for was validation. And so that was-

Dr. James Dobson: You were sort of being set up, weren't you?

Wes Modder: Right. Well, we'd found out later that the young lieutenant j.g. that worked for me was a gay activist, and so I didn't know this was happening behind the scenes. Along with the other chaplain that worked there, she felt that I worked for her, but in fact I didn't. She was with a more liberal denomination. And so she was working in tandem with this young officer, and they were building a case that I was intolerant, that I did not know how to care for people who were different than me. And that's what I've been doing for, at that point, 19 years very successfully. They detached me for cause. That's the civilian equivalent of being fired, detached for cause, lack of confidence. They fired me to the local base chapel.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, despite all these distinguished career markers in your 19 years, the things that were said by these people who reported to you, when you told them what you believed and of your faith became a strike point for you.

Wes Modder: That's true, Doctor. In a chaplain's office, it's much like a priest's confessional. It is the one place military men and women can come and have complete confidentiality, and our military men and women need that. They need a place where they can come, because when you come in the military, you don't check your faith in at the door. You're allowed to have faith, your First Amendment rights. That's why chaplains exist, is to protect the servicemen and women's first amendment rights. And so this is a safe place. This is always a safe place.

Dr. James Dobson: And the theology that you bring there is your own. You don't have to be told what to believe.

Wes Modder: That's correct. But under the Obama administration, the policies at the strategic level had changed so drastically it became more of a behavioral issue on my part. The charges were I wasn't following orders, but what they failed to understand is there's an ordination behind the commission as an officer. As an ordained minister with the Assemblies of God, I'm going to share my personal belief in private counseling sessions with anyone who asks me what I believe. And yet, you do that lovingly. You do it kind. I'm not validating homosexual marriage, but we can talk to them. We can love them, pray with them. I'm not there to really espouse my beliefs. But when I'm asked, I'm certainly going to do so.

Dr. James Dobson: And you were asked.

Wes Modder: And I was asked many times, yes. The gay community is looking for validation and, "The military validated me. Why can't the chaplain validate me?" Well, we're ordained ministers endorsed by ecclesiastical endorsing agents, and I'm a representative of my church to the military. And I'm still able to care for people that I don't agree with. I've been doing it for years. But now the intolerance has reached a level where if you don't believe the way I believe, then you're intolerant. And so that becomes a hostile environment for the believer.

Dr. James Dobson: What charges were brought against you?

Wes Modder: The exact verbiage on the charges were that I was not able to function in a diverse pluralistic environment and the irreparable damage that I'm causing. And where they did not have facts, they filled in with false narrative, and then I was detached for cause. I had to show cause, which means I had to show the Navy why I should even be able to retire. So that was overwhelming.

Dr. James Dobson: They were going to take all your benefits away.

Wes Modder: Yes, sir.

Dr. James Dobson: You were going to be drummed out.

Wes Modder: Yes, sir.

Dr. James Dobson: And leave in disgrace.

Wes Modder: That's correct.

Dr. James Dobson: And you had not had any slur on your 19 years of service.

Wes Modder: None. Right. And so on my last-

Dr. James Dobson: That's the reason I took the time-

Wes Modder: Yes, sir.

Dr. James Dobson: ... to read your background, because that's all relevant to what happened.

Wes Modder: Yes, sir. And so my commanding officer didn't want to meet with me, but I wanted to meet with him. So I sat there without my lawyer, with him and his lawyer. He had a 18-inch stack of paperwork in front of him, and I said, "Well, sir, I'd just like to share my side of the story." And he was aggravated. He was upset that I was even talking to him. And I said, "Well, a couple things. One, I do have a record. And number two, the lie people believe is that you cannot out distance truth, and the reality is His truth will always out distance you." And I told him, "I hope this command finds the truth." Well, they did when I was vindicated and exonerated on all charges.

Dr. James Dobson: So there was an investigation that took place.

Wes Modder: Yes, sir. It took about eight months, and I didn't really know what to do. I know I needed legal counsel. And through Dave Roeveer Ministries, I talked to his secretary. I said, "Louise, what do I do?" I've never met her, but she says, "You need to call First Liberty, Kelly Shackelford."

Dr. James Dobson: Why does that not surprise me? What a great choice.

Wes Modder: I didn't know what I was getting into. I didn't know if I was ever going to recover from this. They sent out Mike Berry and Hiram Sasser, my lawyers, and they were in my living room in a couple days praying for me. And so I am indebted deeply to First Liberty and WilmerHale law firm out of Washington, D.C., who partnered with them.

Dr. James Dobson: The essence is that you didn't take it lying down. You were not disrespectful, but you felt like you had rights and that you had a right to a hearing. And I also assume that you knew many, many of your chaplain colleagues, not only in the Navy but probably through the military. Did they come and say, "Wes, we stand with you. You're representing all of us. The outcome of your case will affect us." How did they react?

Wes Modder: That's a great question. Betrayal, honestly, was the order of the day, because you're concerned about being associated with someone who is in legal trouble, and so I lost some very good friends. And a lot of the military chaplains would come up and whisper in my ear and say, "Hey, Chaplain Modder. You know, we support you in what you're doing." And I was frustrated with that. I'm like, "Well, then you stand up. You take a stand."

I mean, it was advised to me even by my endorser who said, "Hey, Wes, take your good name and go home. There are no winners in this." And I was sitting

there on the car with my wife hearing this, and I'm like, "What do I do?" I could have walked away, but I felt, without being antagonistic, in the right heart, "How many chaplains do I jeopardize by not taking a stand?" And that's why we wear the cross. We wear that.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, all this would not have happened to you 10 years earlier.

Wes Modder: It would not have.

Dr. James Dobson: It didn't happen 10 years earlier because the Pentagon and the military had changed, especially during the eight years of the Obama administrations.

Wes Modder: Yes. And that-

Dr. James Dobson: Because he-

Wes Modder: Yes, sir.

Dr. James Dobson: ... was appointing the generals, the admirals, and the brass.

Wes Modder: That's right. And unfortunately, the military is still accountable to civilian leadership. I am collateral damage of governmental discrimination under the Obama administration. I'm the first military chaplain in the history of our country to be fired for doing my job, and that's not something that I have ever thought of or planned. That's something very humbling that the Lord would entrust me to carry that responsibility and to do it in a way that would bring honor to the Kingdom of God.

Dr. James Dobson: All right, this is a diversion, but it's not an insignificant one, that your case and your issue is not the only example of political correctness that's taking place in the military. It has become very, very liberal, and the leadership that's there now is determined to completely change the nature of the military. I can see why you were a problem for the military, and somebody there said, "That man's got to go," and you were the sacrificial lamb.

Wes Modder: Yes, sir. One of the things we appreciate in the military is loyalty. And it's very imperative that when you are on the field of battle as a Marine or if you're in the army, one of the things you count on is your battle buddy, your swim buddy, your fellow Marine, and you never ever leave someone on the field of battle. And I was very disappointed to see so many chaplains capitulate and to shift on our core values of honor, courage, and commitment, what we were to bring to our men and women in the military.

A lot of times being truthful is the greatest gift that we can be as chaplains. There are a lot of chaplains serving. They need to have the freedom to be able to practice their faith and pray in the name of Jesus Christ and to be able to bring to our military, in very austere circumstances, a message of hope that God

has not abandoned them. And that is the ethos of the military chaplain, that we are going to be there. My function is to advise that commander and care for the troops, and it's not really about Chaplain Wes Modder. It's really about am I willing to fulfill the oath of my office as a commissioned officer and chaplain in the Assemblies of God.

Dr. James Dobson: Dr. Modder, personalize this. What is it like to give your life to something you believe in? You believe in your country, and you believe in the defense of your country. You gave 19 years in dangerous situations with the SEALs and with Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm. You poured your life into this. To all of a sudden have your leadership question your loyalty, you mentioned, and to question your values, even to imply that you kind of lost touch here, and that you were given advice that was harmful instead of helpful. What'd that do to you? What'd it do to your heart?

Wes Modder: Oh, it was crushing. I could hardly believe the charges. It's almost like it happened so quickly. I have a wife and children. And I would think that my constituency, the Navy would have my back, that you would've thought they could have championed it. There's plenty of chaplains who don't do the right thing. Here's a chaplain doing the right thing, but the policies have shifted so drastically that now they're in contrast with scripture. It's hostile to the Christian, and it ought not to be that way. And so it was crushing.

I want to thank the local church. The local church stepped in and provided healing and prayer. Northwood Church out of Charleston, and the church in general, and Family Research Council, and all these people came toward me like, "Man, you're standing up."

Dr. James Dobson: The Lord brought a team around you, didn't He?

Wes Modder: They brought a team. At one point, there was 42 lawyers with two law firms and 55 congressmen. You don't-

Dr. James Dobson: Now, wait, I want you to elaborate on that. 55 congressmen, what'd they do?

Wes Modder: They signed a petition. There's a whole strategy when you're attacked, and there's a strategy to protect you. This is a religious liberty battle. This is why we're here as America, our First Amendment. You have the freedom to believe or not believe, but you don't have the freedom to be oppressive and to discriminate against people who may have a different faith or a Christian, Judeo-Christian belief.

And I'm like, "Why is this happening to me?" It was a fog. We call it a fog of war in the military. I'm like, "Where am I going to go? I could not depend on chaplains, because when I reached out to my superiors, everyone said, "You should be quiet and go home. There's no winners in this." It was my lawyer,

Mike Barry said, "Oh, yes, there are winners. It's going to be you." And they were behind me and fighting for me. I'm like, "I don't deserve this."

But what the Lord was doing supernaturally behind the scenes is, "Wes Modder, I want you to address national sin." This is not something. Marriage is beautiful. I am not advocating that we don't love and respect people, but there's the ordinances of the church, like communion and baptism and marriage that have been honored and respected biblically for millennia.

Dr. James Dobson: They were really wanting you to deny your relationship with Christ, what you read in the Scripture, and what he had been to you. You are not just a chaplain there because Wes Modder wanted this as a career. You went there to convey truth, biblical truth as you knew it and understand it, and they were asking you to deny all that.

Wes Modder: They were. And any commander you ask in the military would want their chaplain to do that, but what happens is you're more concerned about a fitness report or how someone might perceive you or your reputation. But in actuality, there's no guarantee you will retire. It was chaplains that got rid of flogging in the Navy 100 years ago, and so I'm humbled that the Lord would use me.

It's like nope, marriage is a man and a woman. And if you want to practice that in the military, if you want to have a man and a man and a woman and a woman, don't ask me in private counseling sessions to validate that, because that's what the gay community was looking for. I love the Navy. I've forgiven my commander, and I've forgiven the chaplain who brought all these charges and worked behind the scenes. I forgive the lieutenant j.g. who brought these charges. But God used them, and there's going to be fights on many levels, whether it's the Bakers, the Klines, or Kelvin Cochran, the fire chief in Atlanta, and all these people. It's not just us, but it's the church needs to not be silent. Not to be fighting, but pulpits are silent. We need to preach the full counsel of God in a way that's loving and attractive.

But back to your question, Doctor, I'm better for it. It was a crucible. It was like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Reality is I'm not going to bow down. If you create the idol and you write it on policy at their strategic command and moves down to the operational command and down to the tactical command, then the chaplains are down there at the tactical level. They want to follow these orders. I will deploy. I will run. I will cut my hair short. I will do everything the military asks of me, and I did faithfully, but my ordination and my unalienable rights are not something for debate. And if policy goes against scripture, it is my duty and my function to say, "Excuse me, that is wrong."

Dr. James Dobson: I say to that, praise the Lord. Chaplain, Dr. Modder, we've run out of time, but we haven't heard your whole story. I want you to tell the rest of it. Mostly, I want you to talk about where God was in all of that, and let's just pick up next time right here. We will kind of roll back a little bit to let our listeners see what

we've said so far, and then I want to hear your story, because there's victory in it and there is encouragement for all of us-

Wes Modder: Amen.

Dr. James Dobson: ... in your willingness to stand and take the heat. Man, I called you a hero. That's why, and we're going to talk about that next time. Will you be with us again?

Wes Modder: I will. It'll be my honor.

Roger Marsh: Well, what a brave and godly man the late Dr. Wes Modder was through such a challenging time indeed. It has been quite a privilege to relive and hear this testimony again as he is a true hero. Be sure to join us again tomorrow, and you'll hear the conclusion of Dr. James Dobson's conversation with Dr. Wes Modder here on Family Talk.

And if you'd like to share today's program, remember you can easily do so right from the Family Talk app on your smartphone, or visit our website at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk.

And before we leave the air for today, I'm excited to announce the addition of the new Dobson Culture Center, and Dr. Owen Strachan is the new senior director of the DCC. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Strachan to the team, and he's with me now here in studio.

Welcome to the ministry and welcome to the war, Dr. Owen Strachan. Though you've already been fighting this culture war for quite some time, haven't you?

Dr. Owen Strachan: I've been fighting for a few years, but I really appreciate the kind welcome, and it's a joy to be here with you and the team.

Roger Marsh: Okay. You're working from a perspective as a theologian, as a pastor, as an author, and we've had you here as a guest many times on the Dr. James Dobson Family Talk program. But I think probably the thing that impresses me the most is that you are the father of three teenagers, and you're still engaging in this battle. You want to help other families succeed as you are succeeding. Talk about why that's important to you.

Dr. Owen Strachan: Yeah. There but for the grace of God go I in terms of the wreckage of teenage parenting. I'm so thankful for God's grace at this stage in the journey and for all of them. But in all seriousness, we've got to know that our teens are facing fearsome odds in terms of the culture and what it's trying to indoctrinate them in. We have the antidote. We have exactly what they need. And if we will raise our kids in homes that are saturated with grace and truth in a John 1:17 way, we can know that our good God will work out His purposes for their good and His glory.

Roger Marsh: Well, amen. I'm Roger Marsh, and be sure to be listening for more about the Dobson Culture Center on future broadcasts and also on our website at drjamesdobson.org. You've been listening to Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love. Be sure to join us again next time right here for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

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

Dr. James Dobson: This is James Dobson again. As we close today's program, I just want to thank so many of you out there who make this broadcast possible with your contributions, and I want to tell you how much your generosity is appreciated.