



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: The Forgotten Promise of American Liberty – Part 1

Guest(s): Eric Metaxas

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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: Over the past 40 years, Americans have disregarded the values and history of our nation. Children are growing up with very little understanding at the true cost of our freedoms. It's as if our nation on the whole has collectively forgotten our founding principles and ideals. Well, this issue is what we'll be tackling today here on Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh with your host, psychologist, and best-selling author, Dr. James Dobson. You're about to hear one of the most popular programs we've ever aired. It features Dr. Dobson, along with author Eric Metaxas. The discussion today centers around Eric's book, *If You Can Keep It: The Forgotten Promise of American Liberty*. It's a fascinating conversation on the true meaning of liberty and why our fragile republic must be protected at all costs. Here now is Dr. Dobson to further present today's guest and topic, here on Family Talk.
- Dr. James Dobson: Today's topic is specifically designed for those folks who are concerned about what's happening to our beloved country, and it is steadily losing ground culturally and morally. I am deeply honored to have as our guest today Mr. Eric Metaxas. He has been with us I think six times, and there are very few men or women whom I admire more. He's the author of the book *Bonhoeffer*. He's written other highly acclaimed works. His book is what we want to talk about today, and it's titled *If You Can Keep It*, and we'll explain what that means in a minute.
- Eric, I'm so glad you came. It's always a pleasure. You are in demand all over the country, on television, on radio now, and yet you took the time to come be with us again.
- Eric Metaxas: Oh, listen, you talk about being honored. I'm the one who's honored, thrilled to be here. Just thrilled. Thank you for having me.
- Dr. James Dobson: The subtitle of your book reads *The Forgotten Promise of American Liberty*. Is that really true? Have we forgotten the value?

Eric Metaxas: There's no question. There is no question. I have to tell you. You're older than I am, so you don't realize that my generation and younger have really not been taught the basics. And when I say the basics, I mean the fundamentals without which you can hardly say you're an American. If America is an idea, we're not an ethnic group, we're an idea, an idea of self-government, an idea of ordered liberty. These are things that were passed on from generation to generation. People understood that these were not optional. Everyone had to understand this and buy into it otherwise there is no America. Well, since I was a kid in the '60s and '70s, this has really not been passed on, certainly not been passed on in the universities. And so we have forgotten things that once you realize what you have forgotten, it's embarrassing. I was embarrassed because I've only learned these things in recent years to really understand these things.

And so, the title of the book as you know, *If You Can Keep It*, those are the words from the lips of the great Benjamin Franklin. He was exiting the convention where they had just put together the Constitution, and I'll get into this later, but a woman said to him, "Dr. Franklin, what have you given us? A monarchy or a republic?" And now to think that the average person was really wondering, what are they doing in that room? Because they were creating the government that has blessed us and millions beyond these shores for hundreds of years. So this woman says, "What have you given us? A monarchy or a republic?" They really thought in that day, monarchy as far as the eye could see. So they sort of assumed maybe they've figured out that we need some kind of a gentle monarchy.

Well, Franklin looks at the woman and he says... These are famous words. He says, "A republic madam, if you can keep it." And those words, they're haunting because you realize we have not been keeping it I would say the last 40 years. Since the '60s and '70s, we have not been keeping the republic. We don't even think about what that means. And if it's like keeping a garden, we've let it go to seed, and I really believe we're in the last moments of having an opportunity to do what we must do. Otherwise, we will lose this great nation.

Dr. James Dobson: Benjamin Franklin was acknowledging with that answer to the lady that liberty is fragile. It's not the natural state of mankind.

Eric Metaxas: You're giving my speech. You see, he knows better than I do and you've known this forever, but this is what I'm talking about wherever I go. Is that unless you appreciate what you have, you cannot possibly be grateful for it and you cannot possibly live out what you're meant to live out. What we have is utterly abnormal. It is a gift from God and every gift from God as we know, it's not meant to be squandered, it's not meant to be taken for granted. It's a holy, it's a sacred gift and we have used this gift to bless the world for generations. In the last 40 or so years, we've forgotten what we have and we have not understood what you just said, the incredible fragility of this exquisite thing-

Dr. James Dobson: Was that right in saying that it had never been tried. Self-government had never been tried before?

Eric Metaxas: Oh, I say that in the book and I say that... I mean, here's the problem with being blessed. Is that you're so blessed; you take it for granted. You don't realize what it would be like not to have this.

Dr. James Dobson: Especially when the schools never tell you.

Eric Metaxas: Well, as we see, that's the thing. Is that for 40 or so years we have utterly failed to pass this on. And I'm proof of it because it's only in the last number of years that I have fully understood these things.

Dr. James Dobson: Eric, do you really mean that you did not know this still a few years ago?

Eric Metaxas: Well, I would say most of it I didn't know. I knew bits and pieces.

Dr. James Dobson: I'm older than you. I grew up in the public schools where this was hammered into us.

Eric Metaxas: That's the point. It needs to be hammered into us because this is extremely important. It's no different if you're going to fly a jet and somebody doesn't bother to tell you what the controls do. I mean, what we have is the most extraordinary thing that's ever been created by man. It's an engine of liberty that not only has, I would say miraculously lasted for over two centuries, but it has done what it was intended to do. It has spread liberty beyond our shores. There are nations all over the world today. Because of the United States of America, they have various forms of liberty. They talk about religious freedom. They believe in the free market. This is because God used this nation just as when he used Israel. And I'm not comparing us to Israel in that sense, but the point is, when God chooses you, it's to be a blessing beyond yourself. We are blessed to be a blessing.

So around the world, people have benefited because we have been used by God to spread these ideas. And if we who were chosen by God to have this blessing, to bless others beyond our shores. If we forget what we have, it's horrific. It's absolutely horrific, and we have definitely forgotten about this.

Dr. James Dobson: Define what liberty really is and freedom. I mean, does that mean that you can do anything you want at any time?

Eric Metaxas: It's funny, I just posted something on Facebook. It's a hilarious thing from... What was that movie? I don't know if it was Easy Rider or some other movie with Peter Fonda. And somebody says something, "What would you like to do young man?" He goes, "Well, we want to be free to do what we want." In other words, it's the classic '60s definition of freedom as license. It's wrong, right? Freedom is not freedom to do whatever you like. It's freedom to do what is right. And so the founders created this, I would say almost miraculous thing in the Constitution, and I write in the book about the creation of the Constitution. How many who were there themselves believed it was God's hand that allowed

them to create this because it was so difficult for the 13 colonies to figure it out. And Benjamin Franklin exhorted them to pray. Imagine Benjamin Franklin. We think of him as secular. He exhorted them to pray.

So they come up with this thing that allows us to have freedom in the true sense of freedom. Freedom means that I am free to worship God as I see fit. That no one can tell me, no government will tell me what my conscience can tell me. No government will tell me whether to worship God, how to worship God. That's really at the heart of it, is to respect the dignity of human beings and to say that you have the freedom to choose. That's one idea, but then the idea of democracy of self-government, not in the history of the world had this ever existed. People always talk about Greece. Greece invented democracy. Well, I'm Greek and I'm the proudest Greek there is. All Greeks are proud of being Greek, but you cannot compare.

And of course, I read about this in the book because you cannot compare the city states of Greece a couple of a few centuries before Christ. These were tiny city states and they didn't have anything that compares with our freedoms here and with our liberty and democracy. In 1776, you have a bunch of guys getting together and saying that we are going to take this idea of self-government to the extreme and we're going to create an entire nation, not a little city state, but an entire nation from Maine to Georgia and the people will govern themselves. Now imagine if this had never been done in the history of the world, how did they think they could pull this off? The nutshell version is that they knew without God this was not possible. Every one of the founders. We're not just talking about a couple of religious founders. Every one of the founders, Jefferson, Franklin, they all understood that without God this will not, indeed cannot work. Now that is our history. People don't need to like it, but they need to know it is true.

Dr. James Dobson: Let me interrupt to ask you, why wouldn't the people of the world for millennia want freedom? I mean-

Eric Metaxas: It's not that they didn't want freedom.

Dr. James Dobson: ... why is that such a strange concept?

Eric Metaxas: It's not that they didn't want freedom, it's that they didn't know how to pull it off. Since the beginning of time, people have been governed by others. That's just the way it's been. And basically if somebody says, "Well, we'd like to change that," well, they'll overthrow their ruler if they have the power. And then they will govern, and then they will govern those beneath them. In other words, you're always going to have rulers. So the question is, is the ruler benevolent or is it a despot and a tyrant? But the idea of people somehow being able to govern themselves, it was just a foreign concept. It had never existed in the history of the world. And so it's a number of things that come together that allowed the founders to see the possibility of this, but it's such a wild idea. We have to see the wildness of it.

I guess the issue is this. That what I was amazed by in the course of the last number of years is things that I came to learn that had never hit me before. The idea of self-government, for example, to realize... And it was our friend Os Guinness who... He gave a speech at Socrates in the City and he wrote a magnificent book called *A Free People's Suicide*. And in that, I heard this for the first time in my life. He says, "Freedom requires virtue." Every one of the founders understood this and I thought, "Why have I never thought this before and I've never heard this before?" And it makes perfect sense. If you're going to allow people to govern themselves, you have to trust that they're going to be basically virtuous because it means that they don't need somebody at gunpoint saying, "You can't steal." They choose not to steal because they believe stealing is wrong. And it kind of hit me, I thought this is an idea which is so central to our freedoms, but it's never mentioned because we don't talk about things like virtue.

So Os Guinness explained... He calls it The Golden Triangle of Freedom. He says that freedom requires virtue. Virtue of course requires faith. Why would you be virtuous? You have a faith that says, "I want to do what is right. I want to treat people fairly." That kind of virtue generally arises out of faith. But then in turn, faith cannot truly exist unless you have freedom. If faith is coerced, if the government says, "You must go to this church," then it's not real faith. So Os Guinness called it The Golden Triangle of Freedom. Freedom requires virtue. Virtue requires faith. And faith requires freedom. And I remember hearing this and thinking, "This is utterly true." I mean, it makes absolutely perfect sense and all the founders understood it. And I have never heard this in my life.

Dr. James Dobson: I did hear it from my father. He was such a bright man and such a godly man. He studied the Scriptures and he was a minister and I just had almost a reverence for him. And on this point he said a number of times to me that democracy or representative form of government is the worst form of government if the people do not prefer good or virtue.

Eric Metaxas: I mean, that's exactly correct.

Dr. James Dobson: He said, if there is not an inner sense-

Eric Metaxas: That's it.

Dr. James Dobson: ... of right and wrong, then there's no stopping him. That's an actual quote from him. There's no stopping him.

Eric Metaxas: Well, they'll elect a Hitler.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah.

Eric Metaxas: See, previous generations, as I say, I'm not surprised that your father understood this or that you learned it from your father, but since I have grown

up in the last 50 years, this has not been taught. And this is something that all of the founders wrote about and they knew that there's not a chance this can work without this. I mean, they didn't even consider the idea that this could work without virtue and faith. And we have lost that as you know in the last 40 or so years. And that's what gave me the urgency to write this book. I said, we are at the edge of a cliff. We have come here slowly, we haven't noticed it. But if we do not wake up the people of this nation, and I mean all the people, I don't just mean the Christians or the conservatives. I mean most people in America will get this. When they hear it, they will get it. So this is the book you can give to your neighbor. It's not just for Christians or conservatives, but the ideas of course are for every single American.

And we had generations where every American bought into this. It wasn't just a little group of people, but we have not taught this and that's why you can hear the urgency. I feel like this is the last exit before the toll. We have to understand these principles and the stories of Nathan Hale and George Washington. We have to retell these stories, not just to kids, but also to the adults who've missed it.

Dr. James Dobson: The last time you were here you talked about heroes and why it's so important to have heroes.

Eric Metaxas: Oh, that's it. That's it.

Dr. James Dobson: We don't have any heroes anymore.

Eric Metaxas: Well, see that's the thing. Is like in schools, you think about in previous generations they say you can grow up to be like George Washington. You can grow up to be like Abraham Lincoln. We would aspire to be like these leaders who've sacrificed and gone before. If you don't know those stories, you can't aspire to be like them. And I'm convinced that any people, not just America, but any people that is a people, you need to know your stories and your myths and your... We should all know the story of Paul Revere and the poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. We should all know the story of Washington at Valley Forge.

Dr. James Dobson: Tell me why we should remember Paul Revere?

Eric Metaxas: Well, I'll tell you, I have a chapter on the poem in the book because I was so touched by this poem, it just got to me. My daughter was maybe seven and I bought this tiny model of the house of Paul Revere like a paper model you get in a Dover book catalog. And I started thinking about Paul Revere and about that poem. "Listen to my children and you shall hear it." It's in the background and we've all heard it. And I looked up the poem and I read the poem and I was so moved. I thought, "How is it possible that I could live this long and this poem has passed me by?" Because you hear a word or a line or two, but the rest of it, I

didn't know. My daughter memorized it, precociously at age seven or eight. I memorized it with her. I had a tougher time.

Dr. James Dobson: Let me start it. "Listen to my children and you shall hear of the midnight ride of Paul Revere."

Eric Metaxas: "On the 18th of April in '75, hardly a man is now alive who remembers that famous day and year." It goes on and on. The lines are so beautiful and it brought tears to my eyes. The patriotism. Right near the end of the poem, and again, of course I read about this in the book, but there's a line about a man asleep in his bed who at the bridge would be first to fall, felled by a British musket-ball. And you realize that this is real, this happened. In 1860 when Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote this poem, there were men who were alive who remembered this. This was not a myth. And he brings you back and that you're there and looking at the man sleeping in his bed, realizing that he's going to get up and he's going to go out to the bridge and he will die. And people died, then they live for this idea of freedom that we've completely forgotten about this.

And now imagine if Longfellow was writing about this in 1860. He did it. I mean, again, I write about this because I learned about this, that he did this specifically, he wrote this poem to wake up Americans in 1860, just as I'm trying to wake up Americans now. He said, "We are facing the Civil War." He could see it coming. And he said, "We need to remember what went before, what happened in 1775, and we need to..." So the story of Paul Revere, he creates this myth. Of course, it's true. There were a couple of factual places where he played with it, but it's basically not significant. And it's this beautiful poem to rouse the patriotism in our hearts. But imagine if he needed to do that in 1860 to face what was coming, how much more do we need to do this today to remember these stories so that we will understand what is at stake? And understand, by the way, that you and I and everyone listening, we have a role to play.

We must step up and do what is necessary. We've got to fight just as the patriots fought then. And I don't just mean with muskets, but I mean that we are the people, we are the government. And I really feel that Longfellow in his poem, he's trying to get people to say, "You must be the people. You got to step up now. We're facing a crisis." And I think today we're facing a crisis as every bit is real as the crisis we faced at the revolution or the crisis we face at the Civil War, that we could lose this entire nation forever unless people step up.

Dr. James Dobson: And the people had a passion for liberty and freedom. It really came out of religious liberty and-

Eric Metaxas: No question.

Dr. James Dobson: ... how much they valued their relationship with the Lord and nobody telling them what they could do and could not do or what they could believe. Shirley and I enjoy watching old black and white movies. You get them on the-

Eric Metaxas: So do I.

Dr. James Dobson: ...Turner Classic Movies-

Eric Metaxas: That's my favorite station. Turner Classic Movies is my favorite station.

Dr. James Dobson: And mine, and I record a lot of them. It's amazing how often the word liberty or freedom comes up in those old films. And that was 1935 or 1940.

Eric Metaxas: But see, that's the point. Is that it used to be part of the culture and we have forgotten this. Some people have turned against it, but mostly we've just forgotten it. In the book I write about the movie "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," and I say this is one of the greatest films made ever. Every American needs to watch that film. It is just so beautiful. And as you say, films used to touch on this stuff. The culture was in tune with these ideas. But as I say, the title of the book is *The Forgotten Promise of American Liberty*. Since I've been a kid, we have forgotten this, we don't teach it in school, it's not in style to be patriotic. And I write about that, that we better understand the duty we have to love our country. And even what that means, it doesn't mean an unthinking love, but to love what God has blessed us with.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, we're talking to Eric Metaxas, one of the finest authors in this country. And I don't say that glibly. I have great respect for this man, for what he believes, what he says when he speaks. There's wisdom that comes out of his voice. You've heard it today. And his book is a must, a must read. It's *If You Can Keep It*. And it came out of that conversation between Benjamin Franklin and a woman. She asked him a question. Repeat it for those...

Eric Metaxas: She said, "Dr. Franklin, what have you given us? A monarchy or a republic?" And he said-

Dr. James Dobson: And that was the moment when he was coming out of Constitution Hall.

Eric Metaxas: Yes. They had just created the Constitution and everybody wants to know, "What is it? What have you done in there?" So she says, "What have you given us? A monarchy or a republic?" And he shot back, "A republic madam, if you can keep it." And he knew, and all of the founders knew that this is so fragile, it is possible that people won't keep it. If they keep it, it will be glorious and it will be historic. And if they don't keep it, it will not work. It cannot work by itself.

Dr. James Dobson: And from that time to this, more than a million men have died defending it. I think 1.2 million. I just saw this figure. All over the world down through the decades.

Eric Metaxas: Exactly. And I would say that most of them knew what they were dying for. This was not just dying for my tribe. This is something that goes beyond our tribe. It's a beautiful, noble idea. It is meant for the world. It's not just meant for us. And it is sacred because when God gives you something like this, you're blessed to be a blessing. We've been a blessing to the world and we will cease to be a blessing to the world. And we are ceasing now to be a blessing to the world because we have forgotten this. So we need to remember it ASAP.

Dr. James Dobson: Outstanding job. I do hope our listeners will get copies of this book and share it and pass it on. We're going to talk about some more. Eric has offered to be with us for another day, so next time we're going to pick up right here. Eric, thank you for what you do, for your love for the Lord, for your love for the family, for your love for liberty.

Eric Metaxas: Thank you.

Dr. James Dobson: And that's what led you to write this book.

Eric Metaxas: Amen.

Roger Marsh: An incredible call to fight for the dignity of our country and its future. Learn more about Eric Metaxas's book *If You Can Keep It* by going to our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org. While you're there, you'll also find information about his immensely popular radio program as well. So please visit drjamesdobson.org, then tap the broadcast button at the top of the page.

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I'm Roger Marsh. Thanks so much for listening today to our broadcast. Be sure to join us again tomorrow for part two of Dr. James Dobson's interview with author and radio personality, Eric Metaxas. They'll continue discussing how morality, liberty, and law all work together in America. You won't want to miss that fascinating conversation coming up next time right here on Family Talk.

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

Dr. James Dobson: When it comes to family related matters, I'm known as a traditional. In fact, there are some people who think I'd like to take us back to the days of Ozzie and Harriet. I don't want to go back to Ozzie and Harriet. I want to go back to Mayberry with Sheriff Andy Taylor and the gang. I love it when Barney Fife says,

"My whole body's a weapon." Now, I know that Mayberry never existed, that Aunt Bee and Opie were figments of someone's imagination, but there is some validity to that sitcom.

I was in high school during the happy days of the 1950s, and I could tell you that it was a lot easier to grow up in that era. I attended a racially mixed high school and yet there were no gangs there, very little alcohol, and absolutely no drugs. None. Most of us studied hard enough to get by and we rather liked our parents. As for sex, there was far more talk about it than action. About once a year, a girl came up pregnant, but she was packed off somewhere and I never knew where she went. By almost any measure, kids simply fared better in those days. Nevertheless, that era is gone forever. You can't back up on a freeway. But considering the enormous pressures on today's generation, we could make the world safer and more secure for them. And the place to start is by building stronger and more harmonious families in which they can grow.

Roger Marsh:

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