



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: If You Can Keep It: 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: Well, welcome to Family Talk, the broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh. You know, it's hard to believe that a week from this Saturday, America will be celebrating her 250th anniversary. Benjamin Franklin was once asked, as he stepped out of the Constitutional Convention, what kind of governors the founders had created. His response is legendary. He said, "A republic, if you can keep it." Those five words carry a warning that rings just as urgently today as it did when he spoke them in 1787.
- Well, our guest today here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk is author Eric Metaxas. He believes that we are in the final moments of keeping that republic and that most Americans literally have no idea how close to the edge we have come. His book on this topic is called *If You Can Keep It: The Forgotten Promise of American Liberty*. It's a compelling call to remember what made this nation possible in the first place. With our 250th anniversary just around the corner, let's revisit part one of his conversation with Dr. James Dobson on this most important topic right now 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.
- Eric Metaxas: 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. There's 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, 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 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 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 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, you know this 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 I 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, you 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 until a few years ago.

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

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

Eric Metaxas: But 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. It has done what it was intended to do was to 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, right? 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. 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 to him, "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, right? 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 write about this in the book because you cannot compare the city-states of Greece, you know, 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're 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, 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 is a wild – 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. 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...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, right?

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 know, you must go to this church or you must, then it's not real faith. So Os Guinness is called 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: You know, I did hear it from my father. He was such a bright man and such a godly man. And 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 a representative form of government is the worst form of government if the people do not prefer good or virtue.

Eric Metaxas: That's exactly correct.

Dr. James Dobson: And he said, if there is not an inner sense of right and wrong, then there's no stopping them. That's an actual quote from him. There's no stopping them.

Eric Metaxas: Well, 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. 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 a 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.

Dr. James Dobson: The last time you were here, you talked about heroes and why it's so important to have heroes. We don't have any heroes anymore.

Eric Metaxas: Well, see, that's the thing is like in schools, you know, 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 you've got to...we should all know the story of Paul Revere and the poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. We should all know the story of Washington and Gereld Ford.

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 can get in a Dover book catalog. And I started thinking about Paul Revere and about that poem. You know, we've all heard "Listen to My Children and You Shall Hear." It's in the background. We've all sort of 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 know, 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, 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 write 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. 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 and they lived for this idea of freedom, but we've completely forgotten about this. And now imagine if Longfellow was writing about this in 1860, he did it. And he, 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. So the story of Paul Revere, he creates this myth. Of course, it's true. There are 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've got to step up now. We're facing a crisis. And I think today we're facing a crisis as... every bit as real as the crisis we face 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 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. You know, Shirley and I enjoy watching old black and white movies. 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, you know, 1935, 1940.

Eric Metaxas: But see, that's the point is that it used to be part of the culture.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah.

Eric Metaxas: 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, Benjamin Franklin and a woman. She asked him a question. Repeat it for those...

Eric Metaxas: She said, yeah, 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: 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 in all of the wars down through the decades.

Eric Metaxas: 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. 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, pass it on. We're going to talk about it 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. And that's what led you to write this book.

Eric Metaxas: Thank you. Amen.

Roger Marsh: A republic, if you can keep it. Benjamin Franklin spoke those words nearly 250 years ago. And as America marks that anniversary coming up next weekend, they have never felt more timely. You're listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk as we revisit a compelling conversation Dr. Dobson had with his good friend, author Eric Metaxas, about the forgotten foundations of American liberty. To hear today's broadcast again or to share it with a friend, visit jdfi.org. And while you're there, be sure to look for the link to Eric's book. It's called *If You Can Keep It: The Forgotten Promise of American Liberty*. Again, you'll find information about the book as well as the audio when you go to jdfi.org.

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Well, I'm Roger Marsh, thanking you so much for listening to Family Talk and for supporting the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute today and every day. Be sure to join us again next time for part two of this powerful conversation featuring Dr. James Dobson and his guest, Eric Metaxas. They will explore how George Whitefield's preaching laid the spiritual foundation for American liberty and what the golden triangle of freedom means today for our nation. That's coming up next time right here on the next edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust for the family you love.

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

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