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# VERITAS

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## Real-Life Advice from a Living Legend



*This article is adapted from the "Legends in Leadership Luncheon" held April 2, 2001, honoring Dr. Howard Hendricks on the 50th anniversary of his coming to serve the Lord at Dallas Seminary. At the luncheon, Dr. James Dobson sat down on stage for a live, unrehearsed interview with the man fondly called "Prof" by students for five decades. And at the end, one of those students, Chuck Swindoll, joined them to close an illuminating, humorous, and poignant occasion.*

**Dobson:** Dr. Hendricks, I have really been looking forward to this opportunity. You've spent 50 years here at DTS. Have you ever gotten bored in that period of time?

**Hendricks:** I'd have to say, never once. I think this has been the most exciting challenge of my life.

**Dobson:** What is the source of a challenge that would keep you stimulated for five decades?

**Hendricks:** Well, you need to know my students.

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*Dr. Howard G. Hendricks serves Dallas Theological Seminary as a distinguished professor and as chairman of the Center for Christian Leadership. He has ministered personally in 70 countries and has reached many others through books, tapes, and videos. A visionary, he provides leadership as a board member for several organizations.*

*Dr. James C. Dobson is founder and president of Focus on the Family. His syndicated programs are heard daily on more than 5,300 radio facilities, in nine languages and in 93 countries. His first book of the 14 he has authored, Dare to Discipline, has sold over 3 million copies.*

*Dr. Charles R. Swindoll is a pastor, author, radio Bible teacher, and chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary. His radio program Insight for Living airs 1,000 times daily worldwide. He has written 45 books and has served as president of Dallas Seminary from 1994 to May 2001. He is senior pastor of Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, Texas.*

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[laughter] Many are internationally known, and many do extraordinary work that only God knows about. And to think God gave me the opportunity to build into their lives.

**Dobson:** You grew up in a dysfunctional family, didn't you?

**Hendricks:** Yes. My parents were separated before I was born. But in God's infinite providence and grace, He deposited me in my father's parents' home. It was there that I received a great deal of love. The only negative was my grandfather. When he and my grandmother had their first child, the child died from what we would call Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. It drove her to Christ and it drove him to alcohol.

My most vivid memories as a kid are of going from taproom to taproom, seeing if I could find my grandfather and pull the pay envelope out of his back pocket so that we would have something to eat. He was a very generous individual. He would set up the bar, everybody in it, but left without any residue for his family.

**Dobson:** I'm told you did not know a lot about the Lord in those days, but I've been reading that somebody named Walt played a very key role in your life. Tell us about him.

**Hendricks:** Walt was probably one of the most significant people, spiritually, to me. He came down my street one day because he was

looking for boys for his Sunday school class. He asked me if I'd like to go to Sunday school. Anything that had "school" in it had to be a bad news item to me. Then he said, "How would you like to play marbles?" Well, that was different.

We played marbles until, would you believe, he whipped me in every game. I lost my marbles early in life. But when he got through, I didn't care where he was going, that's where I wanted to go. And, interestingly, he picked up 13 of us boys. Today, 11 of us are in full-time vocational ministry. I can't remember a thing he ever said. *I can remember everything about him.* He literally loved me more than my parents did.

**Dobson:** What about the call? The call to ministry. The call from God.

**Hendricks:** I feel, Jim, that God called me really a number of times, in the sense that He moved in my heart to ask me to invest my life for Him. I thought it was going to be in surgery. But I finally came to the conclusion, and this is with deep appreciation for my surgical friends, that you can work on a body, but ultimately it's going to die. Or you can work on a soul, and it's going to last forever. I gave up a scholarship to Northwestern University, which, if I made good, would go through med school, and told my father, "I'm going to Wheaton," and then came to Dallas.

*When he and my grandmother had their first child, the child died.... It drove her to Christ and it drove him to alcohol.*

**Dobson:** How soon did you know that you were a good teacher? I don't want any modesty from you. We all know this. How soon did you know that there was an ordination on your life?

**Hendricks:** I think from the first class that I taught at Dallas, which would be in 1951. I began to get feedback from students. I began to see life-changes that I'd never seen before. The further I went, the more significant it became, until finally I came to the realization that this is what God wired me to do. Not only because I liked to do it and because I did it well, but also because it gave me the greatest fulfillment. I have no greater joy than that my students walk in the truth.

**Dobson:** Now, one of the first emphases that you had here at DTS, as I understand it, was an emphasis on the family, and it was controversial in those days. Why would the family be controversial?

**Hendricks:** Well, I think it was controversial because nobody had a basis for evaluating it. I remember going to Mount Hermon for one of the early couples' conferences and I'd have people come up afterward and say, "Where did you get this stuff?" I said, "I got it out of the Bible." "The Bible? I didn't know the Bible said anything about it."

**Dobson:** One of the first quotes of yours that I shared on *Focus on the Family*, and it must have been early 1980, sometime in there, was your statement that, "If

your Christianity does not work at home, it doesn't work. Don't export it." Do you remember making that statement?

**Hendricks:** I remember.

**Dobson:** That's a powerful statement. Do you still believe that?

**Hendricks:** I still believe it.

**Dobson:** I read that quote again last week. I've been doing a lot of research on you. I've done my homework.

**Hendricks:** Yeah, I found out. [laughter]

**Dobson:** You haven't heard it all. One man said that his

marriage would not have survived if it hadn't been for your emphasis on the family in your classes. And that represents probably thousands of people who learned, for the first time, those principles of marriage and child-rearing. You've gotten most of that right out of the Scriptures.

**Hendricks:** Obviously, I've read a lot and so forth. But I would have to say that the thing that motivated me the most, Jim, was the study of the Word of God. This is alive. This is God's pattern, whether we understand it or not—but we need to.

**Dobson:** You must be worried today about what's happening to pastors and their families. There's a struggle there that I was not aware of five years ago that is really breathtaking.

**Hendricks:** Incredible struggle. Jeanne and I spend a great deal of our time, by design,

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in pastors' conferences. I would have to tell you that we spend most of our time in these conferences in counseling, trying to encourage pastors to put their families back together, particularly in a context of where many of them are being battered. They're being battered by the Christian community.

**Dobson:** In your book, *Teaching to Change Lives*, you refer to the law of the teacher. What is that?

**Hendricks:** The law of the teacher is that essentially the teacher must know that which he desires to teach. Obviously, if he doesn't know it, he's communicating out of a vacuum. I believe that the key to a good teacher is that he never stops studying, that he's a student among his students. I find that the easiest thing, as you well know, in academia is just to go with the yellowed notes. You've got them down, you've got the tenure. That's paralyzing.

**Dobson:** Before we leave the issue of the family, I want to share something with our friends here today that you obviously already know. This is a story that was shared with me by Mike Lawson. He said you had a commitment to speak in Fort Worth, Texas, many years ago. As you were walking out the door, your son reminded you that you hadn't fixed his bicycle as you had promised.

This was before the time of cell phones, so you couldn't get in touch with the host of the event. You were standing there with your

suit on, but you took off your coat, rolled up your sleeves, and fixed the bike. Consequently, you arrived at the event after dinner, even though you weren't late for the speaking portion. The emcee was fit to be tied. You told him that it was just more important to fix your kid's bike than to eat his chicken dinner.

Would you all like to express appreciation? [applause] You lived by that standard; therefore you could export it, right? That responsibility of raising children, was that the most significant thing you've done with your life?

**Hendricks:** Well, I would certainly say that it was very high on my priority list. Jeanne and I would be the first to say that we're not convinced that we did that great a job raising our children, but our family was our commitment. When I think of where I came from, I realize that

it's pure grace that I've been able to accomplish anything.

**Dobson:** You have placed a very heavy emphasis on choosing, making tough choices, between good and better.

**Hendricks:** I believe, ultimately, that the difference between any two individuals revolves around their choices. We all know what the truth is. The question is, are we willing to do it? Are

*we willing to make the hard choices, particularly when they come into conflict with our normal way of thinking?*

**Dobson:** Related to that is,

*The key to a good teacher is that he never stops studying, that he's a student among his students.*

"the secret of concentration is elimination."

**Hendricks:** It's obvious that none of us can do everything. So you have to make choices. I find that a person has to choose between the things that he or she *can* do and the things that he or she *must* do. That calls for elimination. We all have to-do lists. We need "to-don't" lists.

**Dobson:** You wrote that you live with the dread of domesticated, declawed Christianity.

**Hendricks:** I fear that with a passion, Jim, because I find that we've so neutered Christianity, we've so taken the drive and the New Testament qualities out of it that sometimes you read the pages of the New Testament compared with what we are doing, and the relationship is one of contrast.

**Dobson:** Give me an example of that.

**Hendricks:** Sure. I think, for example, in terms of our commitment to materialism, which in Dallas we particularly struggle with, to realize that in the life of Christ there was tremendous devotion to invest His life in that which is going to last forever, in contrast to investing His life in things that are in the process of going to a junk heap.

**Dobson:** What do you mean by "coloring outside the lines"?

**Hendricks:** What I mean is, we need more creative people. I cannot believe that we are related to such an infinitely creative God

and we're so boring. That's why I love to teach a course in creativity, as I do every year, and see the giant steps that students take. It's back to one statement that you

*A person has to choose between the things that he or she can do and the things that he or she must do.*

made earlier, and that is, that a lot of kids come out of homes where they have more prohibitions than they have encouragements. More "Don't do this" than "Do this."

**Dobson:** Suppose you were talking today to a very young student, on fire for the Lord and not sure how to do what the Lord was asking him to do. What one word of advice would you give him?

**Hendricks:** First of all, you need to spend the bulk of your time determining your objectives. What do you want? Not now, but at the end of life. And secondly, what are your priorities? That is, how badly do you want it? It's back to cost. What price are you willing to pay?

I had the privilege of meeting Van Cliburn sometime ago. A dear lady in our church who played in the symphony said, "If you come at the end of the concert, I'll introduce you to him." What an invitation. So I got to ask him the one question that I wanted to ask him, and that is, "How many hours a day do you practice?" And very casually, almost in an offhand manner, he said, "Oh, eight or nine." And to think my mother wanted me to be a concert pianist! Would I like to play like Van Cliburn? You'd better believe it, but not

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that badly.

**Dobson:** You had cancer several years ago. What went through your mind when you were sitting in the doctor's office and he looked you in the eye and used the big "C" word?

**Hendricks:** Jeanne and I will never forget sitting in Medical City in a hospital room. Our doctor—a guy I love like crazy because of his honesty—said, "Howie, you need to know this could be the end of the trolley line for you. It could be the end of your seeing, the end of your hearing, the end of your thinking." Jeanne and I sat, after he left, by a bed, and I said, "Sweetheart, we've been teaching the sovereignty of God all our life. Now we've got an opportunity to live it."

**Dobson:** Were you angry?

**Hendricks:** I was not.

**Dobson:** Disillusioned?

**Hendricks:** No, for the simple reason that two things go together for me: His sovereignty and His goodness. And when you put those two together, you've got an invincible combination. I slept the best I have ever, with no narcotics, that night. I mean it was just sheer, unadulterated peace.

**Dobson:** What does heaven mean to you today?

**Hendricks:** Heaven is the greatest prospect of my life because I've been spending all of my life trying to get people to go there, to depopulate hell and populate heaven. But also because of the people who are going to be there, and already some of my

closest friends, even classmates, have gone there. I can hardly wait to see the Lord's presence, but I'm not planning on it tomorrow because I've still got a lot that I want to do.

**Dobson:** One of your former students said to me, "The legend is often bigger than the reality in individual cases. But with Dr. Howard Hendricks, the legend isn't big enough."

I have saved just a few minutes because I mentioned to Chuck before we began today that I would like for him to join us. Would you come up on the platform? We get the important chairs because we're big people, and you get the little green one there....

**Swindoll:** You know, just to sit near this guy. Maybe it'll rub off on me.

**Dobson:** You and I had a telephone conversation last week about your relationship with Dr. Hendricks and what he has meant to you. I tell you, it moved me emotionally. What does he mean to you?

**Swindoll:** When I came to the Seminary I was so intimidated by the profs and the students. I came really like most students, pretty scared. I didn't know that it was supposed to be fun.

This man taught me that learning can be fun, that it is really passing from an unawareness of your ignorance to an awareness of just how ignorant you are.

And yet he made the Bible live. Any person in here who lifted his or her hand a moment ago would

mention the course on Bible Study Methods. No course in my life ever impacted me to such a degree. To this day, when I go to the Scriptures, when I go to prepare a message or whatever, I use that same set of principles that he taught me. And as I said to you earlier, his ability to motivate is just profound.

**Dobson:** Describe the time that Cynthia had almost lost another baby and you were going through perhaps the most difficult time up until that stage of your life.

**Swindoll:** Yes. We had, over the Christmas holidays, been at our home. It was an icy day and a drunk hit us and totaled our car. Cynthia was thrown against the dashboard. She was carrying our baby. We had already lost one, and I was sure we'd lose another. We came back to the Seminary with no car, no money, and it looked like no future and no baby perhaps.

I remember looking for someone to talk to. This is a true story. I remember going upstairs to where some of the profs had their offices and looking for a light to be on under one of the doors, and I could knock on the door and maybe he would take time to talk to me. I remember I found a light on and this particular prof opened the door and said, "Yes, what do you want?" I said, "If you're busy, I don't want to bother you." And he said, "Well, I am busy, and you are bothering me." I'm happy to say that prof is no longer teaching at Dallas Seminary, but he was gone before I got here.

But I remember coming down those stairs and, it so happened, it was one of those many nights Prof. Hendricks stayed late, and we ran into each other. He put his arms around me and said, "I can tell by looking at you that you're

troubled." I said, "Yes, I am. Cynthia's home in bed, hemorrhaging. I know we're going to lose our baby." You know, it was great. He didn't preach; he didn't ask me to review a few verses with him. He told me he loved me and that he'd be there, whatever this meant.

At that moment, I was a senior then, he changed from being a teacher to a mentor. That's one of the great moments of my life.

You know what happened the next week of classes? He'd been transformed. He became the personification of everything I wanted to be. ♦

*We all have to-do lists.*

*We need "to-don't" lists.*