



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: The Heart of the Story: Tough Love in Marriage – Part 2

Guest(s): Tracey Russell

Air Date: December 8, 2020

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Dr. Dobson: You're listening to Family Talk, the radio broadcasting division of the James Dobson Family Institute. I am that James Dobson, and I'm so pleased that you've joined us today.

Roger Marsh: Hi, this is Roger Marsh for Family Talk with some exciting news! We've selected 18 of the most popular broadcasts of the past year and present them to you together on six audio CDs in the 2020 Family Talk Best of Broadcast collection. Join Dr. Dobson and many incredible guests, like Lysa TerKeurst, John Eldredge, and Rabbi Jonathan Cahn in this compelling audio collection. You can get your CD set as our way of thanking you for a gift of any amount in support of Family Talk. We are also blessed to share that your gift today will be doubled by a matching grant, while it lasts. Contact us now by calling 877-732-6825, or visit us online at drjamesdobson.org.

Welcome everyone to Family Talk, a production of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh, and today we are revisiting another program that made our 2020 best of broadcast list. Hope you enjoy it.

Roger Marsh: Over 40 years ago, Dr. James Dobson wrote the timeless work called *Love Must Be Tough*. This book was written to encourage couples to fight for each other when adversity inevitably comes in their marriage. Today, you're going to continue to hear a real life story of a marriage that was saved by that book. Last time here on Family Talk, Tracey Russell openly talked with Dr. Dobson about her troubled relationship with her husband. She explained how the discord and conflict in her marriage to Mark began literally on their honeymoon. He was so emotionally distant following their wedding that Tracey felt betrayed. She was so grieved by Mark's attitudes because she so desperately wanted their relationship to work. It wasn't until a friend gave her a copy of the book *Love Must Be Tough* that Tracey's perspective started to change.

If you missed the first part of her story, by the way, be sure to go back to drjamesdobson.org and you can listen to it there. Now, the introduction to these marital concepts is what we want to dive back into in this interview. So

here once again is Dr. James Dobson as he introduces Tracey Russell on this edition of Family Talk.

Dr. Dobson: I want to pick up where you were last time, when I had written in the book there's some things that I wanted you, as the reader, I wanted you to say to Mark. I didn't know him, I didn't know you, but I was talking to a lot of people. And I wrote a letter which was an example of what a victim, a person who has been trying to hold it together with appeasement, and with promises, and tears, and begging, and pleading, and grabbing, and holding, and all of those things that drives a person away, it actually makes them more desperate to get away then, because what they're feeling is trapped. You have to lift the cage door and allow them to leave, and in that you change the entire question from, "How can I get out of here?" To, "Do I really want to go?" That's what we want to do. So I suggested that you and all the other readers take this letter, use it as a model, if you will, even quote it, but then send that to the person who wants out. This is the message. Would you read it?

Tracey Russell: Yes. I'd love to read it, Dr. Dobson. Here it goes. "I've been through some very tough moments since you decided to leave, you know. My love for you is so profound that I couldn't face the possibility of life without you. To a person like me who expected to marry only once, and to remain committed for life, it is a severe shock to see our relationship begin to unravel. Nevertheless, I have done some intense soul searching, and I now realize that I've been attempting to hold you against your will. That simply can't be done. As I reflect on our courtship and the early years together, I'm reminded that you married me of your own free choice. I didn't blackmail you, or twist your arm, or offer you a bribe. It was a decision that you made without pressure from me."

"Now you say you want out of the marriage and obviously I have to let you go. I'm aware I can no more force you to stay today than I could have when you married me. You are free to go. If you never call me again, then I will accept your decision. I admit that this entire experience has been extremely painful, but I'm going to make it. The Lord has been with me this far and He'll go with me into the future. You and I had some wonderful times together. You are my first real love, and I'll never forget the memories we shared. I will pray for you and trust God will guide you in the years ahead."

Dr. Dobson: You took that letter word for word.

Tracey Russell: Almost word for word. Almost word for word. Yes, I did.

Dr. Dobson: And sent it to Mark.

Tracey Russell: I stood in the doorway when he came home one night, and I said those words to him, and he said, "I think I should go." And he started to gather up all of his things, and he gathered them together, and right on the way out, Chase and I were just sitting there watching him leave and he said, "You know," he said, "I

think I know what it would take to save our marriage, and I'd have to become a Christian, but I'm not going to do that."

Dr. Dobson: He had never said anything like that.

Tracey Russell: No. And I should have known then, Dr. Dobson, when he said, "I'll never become a Christian," I should have known then that God was doing something amazing. I should have known when someone says "never," but I didn't know then. And I remember honestly sitting-

Dr. Dobson: But he did put his finger on the key issue.

Tracey Russell: He really did. He was fighting the Lord. It really wasn't a battle with me. He was fighting internally to figure out where he was going to be in his faith walk with God. And I sat on the couch that night, and for the first time since I had been married, since I'd had a baby, I felt absolute peace. I felt total and complete peace. I felt relief. I felt surrounded by the God that I love, and I did not feel alone, because it is better for a woman to be alone with God than to be alone in a house with a man that doesn't love her.

Dr. Dobson: I wish there were a way for me to pour out what I'm feeling as you're talking, because I've heard those words so many times before.

That a person who has been rejected and vilified, and hurt and wounded, and threatened, and maybe even hit, and then holds out the possibility of divorce, and all of the pressure one person can put on another. And once you come to that point where you say, "I deserve respect." And, "I can't make you love me, and I've come to the place where I will let you go. The cage door is open." And you can't be playing games.

Tracey Russell: Right.

Dr. Dobson: This is not a little game that you play.

Tracey Russell: No.

Dr. Dobson: You have to believe it. And if he had left and never come back, you would not have chased him, would you?

Tracey Russell: No. No. And I want to affirm you, Dr. Dobson, for the words that you speak to women, because the way you champion women, I'm one of those women that you championed, and it's very difficult in the Christian culture to stand your ground and to have someone tell you that you trust and admire that you can hold your self-esteem up, and you can demand respect, and you can be tough, and you can still be a Christian and be right where the Lord has you. So I just want to affirm you for that and thank you.

Dr. Dobson: I'm sure you know that that's not the advice that's typically given.

Tracey Russell: I never got that advice.

Dr. Dobson: Pastors, and counselors, and coffee club counselors, and those who ... Mother-in-laws, and mothers, and sisters, they will, nearly all from a Christian perspective, say, "Stand by your man, ladies. Take it. God calls you to be submissive under all circumstances." Some even say to a woman, "Let him have the other woman if he wants to. You've got to save your marriage." Some have even said, "Bring her into the marital bed." The horrible advice that is given in those circumstances spells the death knell of the marriage. If I thought it worked to do that, and if it was in keeping with Christian principles and scripture, I would recommend it. If it was he's been gone for six weeks and he shows up at the door, and you can smell alcohol on his breath, and you say, "Come in, Jack, I want to talk to you." And you go in the kitchen, you make him a meal, and you pander to him and appease him, that will not ... I wish that worked, but it doesn't.

Tracey Russell: It doesn't.

Dr. Dobson: What works is self-respect, and what's going on here and what causes another person to want out is that he looks at you and he says, "I don't think I can stand spending the rest of my life with her." Or a woman can look at her husband who's sleeping on the couch after watching a ball game, and she looks at him and she says to herself, "Look at him. He's going nowhere and he's taken me with him. His mouth is open. Look at him. I don't think he's got an original thought in his head. I've got to get out of here." It's the same on the other foot. It's not just men for women. It is women for men, and it is a matter of dignity and respect. When you begin to show respect for yourself, you feel better-

Tracey Russell: True.

Dr. Dobson: ... even if the marriage doesn't always work, and no advice works with everybody.

Tracey Russell: True.

Dr. Dobson: I mean, sometimes the marriage blows up, and when it does, it's usually because it was already gone. There's a point at which you can pull the marriage back together, but if you wait too long until marriage dies, and it can die, then you make the best out of it, and put your life together, and you do what was said in that letter. "God and I are going to make it together."

In the counseling that I've done, the one thing that's needed that I don't have the time or the opportunity to provide is the, "What do I do now?" questions. He's been out there. He's starting to tell you that, "I'm thinking again about what I've done and not sure it's right." "What do I say now? What do I do now?"

If he says, "I want to come back and I want to take my rightful place as a husband in your home and in your bed," what do you do now? How do you respond to this? You need someone that understands these principles, a counselor that can say, "Don't let him come yet. He's not ready."

You know, there's a process that goes on, and it is amazing. It's just amazing, Tracey, how change can occur when the cage door swings open. It causes a complete reexamination of saying, "Wait a minute, now. This thing's getting out of control. I see the door shutting to my marriage. Is that really what I want? I thought I did, but do I?" It changes the whole game. I don't want to call it a game, because it's for real and it's meaningful.

Tracey Russell: Well, and it did. I mean, definitely, when he first left, I think he seemed or he appeared fine. And that's what was so hard, was he seemed to go on with his whole life. But I can tell you- you ask, "What do you do?" I can tell you what you don't do. This is what I did, is that I was incredibly vulnerable. And I'll never forget, after months of my husband being gone and not really wanting to reconcile, I went out with a girlfriend, and I was out to dinner, and suddenly a good looking man walked in that door, and I put my hand under the table for the first time and I slid my wedding ring off, and I put it in my purse.

Dr. Dobson: Oh, Satan is so vicious.

Tracey Russell: And I thought, "I want another chance." And so one thing that I always tell women is be very careful when you're living out tough love, because you're vulnerable and you don't realize it. But if you've been rejected for a certain amount of time, it's a natural, normal part of a woman to want to be loved by a man, but that's not the way to go about it. So I always tell them to not do that, to be really protective of yourself, and to cling to God, and to surround yourself with a lot of godly women and a lot of good advice.

What happened was finally it was just enough was enough, and I remember my dad going to Mark and saying, "Hey, do you want to be married to my daughter or not?" And Mark saying, "Well, I love her, but I'm just not committed." And my dad walked in from that conversation, took out his checkbook, wrote a check to me and said, "Tracey," he slammed the check down, and he said, "get out now, because all I've had all my whole life to your mom was my commitment. And if this guy isn't committed to you, get a divorce, and I'm paying for it." And so I thought, "For sure, I'm going to get this divorce."

Well, here's the funny thing that happened. As I start filing for divorce. Out of the blue, Mark had an old friend that kept bugging him, and bugging him, and bugging him to go to a Bible study, and wouldn't you know, as I start filing for divorce, Mark is taken to a Bible study, and at his first Bible study, a man stands up and says, "Guys, I'm so sorry. Our main teacher isn't here today. All I've got is my story, and I want to share with you from the heart my struggles as a Christian man." And he spoke, and suddenly on the spot, Mark's heart changed and he accepted Christ.

Dr. Dobson: Praise the Lord.

Tracey Russell: I know. Praise the Lord, but at this point I was starting to get rather bitter, was already filing for divorce, and I think we tried. Like you said, there was some signs of turning around and suddenly. The lights went on for him. That light switch went on, and these godly men just rallied around Mark and said, "You've got to get right with the Lord. You've got to get your life back with him, and maybe one day you'll get your family, but get right with God." And they started discipling him and mentoring him, and he was like, "Maybe we could do this. Maybe we can get back together." But I said, "Mark, if we're going to reconcile, we're not going to reconcile on any secrets. So I have to know, was there any reason that you were so distant? What was it?"

Dr. Dobson: Let me guess. Another woman.

Tracey Russell: There was unfaithfulness involved. And with that, there was no more crying.

Dr. Dobson: [crosstalk 00:14:27].

Tracey Russell: There was no more crying. There was no more appeasement.

Dr. Dobson: Let me tell you the circumstance. When suddenly a spouse wants out, when suddenly the marriage is over, when suddenly there's no desire for counseling, when suddenly they don't want to talk or work on it, there's nearly always somebody else.

Tracey Russell: Yes. It's red flag, red flag, red flag. And so with that, I remember just looking out the window at the sunset and saying, "You know, I really don't want to be a single mom. I am so sorry you made that decision, but it's over, and we're getting a divorce." And he was like, "No, please, please, let's try." I was like, "No, I'm sorry. We're getting a divorce." And I called my uncle who's a pastor who married me, and I said, "Uncle John, I have Christian grounds for divorce. I am getting my divorce." And at this point, a new feeling started coming in, Dr. Dobson, that I really liked. It's called anger, and it was so empowering. It felt good to be mad, because it-

Dr. Dobson: Anger feels better than brokenness.

Tracey Russell: It felt so much better. And so I called my uncle, I said, "Uncle John, I'm getting this divorce." And he said, "Tracey, but wait," he said. "I have seen so many incredible marriages turn around. If God is in this, do not get your divorce, because I know the power of God." And I said, "Uncle John, I don't care. I'm getting my divorce anyways. I want out. I want out of this marriage." And I was going to get my divorce, but unfortunately I got right back into myself through the divorce, and through my choice to be angry and bitter and vengeful.

Dr. Dobson: You got some really good advice there, and I would have given you the same advice. My purpose in writing the book is not to bring people to divorce. I mean, anybody can do that, to kill the patient.

Tracey Russell: Right.

Dr. Dobson: I want it to survive. I want it to thrive. And so rather than getting a divorce, give God time-

Tracey Russell: That's exactly what he told me.

Dr. Dobson: ... but allow the process to take place without your trying to force it.

Tracey Russell: Right. That's exactly what he had told me.

Dr. Dobson: You know, divorce is a horrible thing. It tears up children. You never get over it. There's a ripping and tearing of flesh that occurs.

Tracey Russell: That's so true.

Dr. Dobson: And I would not have wanted to give you the impression that that's what I thought the end game was.

Tracey Russell: True. Right.

Dr. Dobson: It is to show respect for yourself, stand your ground, go on with your life and make it clear that you can't go on the way it was. "It can never be that way again. You can't treat me that way again, and if we have to live separate for the rest of our lives, then we will do that."

Tracey Russell: Right.

Dr. Dobson: I hope people are getting the message here.

Tracey Russell: Yeah. And so back to your question, when you said, "Are you a strong woman?" I wish I could tell you at this point that a strong woman empowers herself with anger, but she doesn't. She trusts God. And so I had to learn the hard way that the anger and the bitterness and getting that divorce, what I thought would empower me, started to rot my heart out. And so I did get my divorce, but God is strong. He is the one that is so faithful, and he was the one who wasn't going to let me go, even when I made the mistake. And so I went out and I was going to date other people. I was going to find that person to love me, because I wanted the story again. I wanted the beautiful story with the man who loved me.

And by the grace of God, I had a godly woman show up into my life at church and she said, "Tracey, I want you to come to this Bible study with me. If you

ever want to get remarried, I think it would be great for you." And she totally tricked me into going to that Bible study because, I've talked to her since, and she said she really believed that Mark was genuine, but she knew at that point I was believing a lot of lies from the world, and one of those lies, like you said, is that a divorce is going to heal me. "People can't change." I was just stained black marks on the white dress. I had to recreate the story of my life by finding someone new. And so after the Bible study, we were into it, I started to realize," Oh my goodness, those are the lies of the world. That is not the truth of God. That is not what God says." Because God's word says, "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation."

Dr. Dobson: So we're getting near the end.

Tracey Russell: Yes.

Dr. Dobson: The good news, the wonderful news is you remarried Mark.

Tracey Russell: Yes. We did.

Dr. Dobson: You didn't go look for somebody else. You remarried the man you originally loved.

Tracey Russell: I did.

Dr. Dobson: And you have been together for how many years?

Tracey Russell: We've been together now for 23 years. He just held up 23 for me. But yes, God wasn't going to leave me in that, and-

Dr. Dobson: Did you find the original love?

Tracey Russell: Oh, it's much better than the original love, because we have a marriage based on Christ, and we both sought God and found Him as our firm foundation.

Dr. Dobson: Is it based on self-respect? Mutual respect?

Tracey Russell: It's based on mutual self-respect and the principles of the book still stand, so I'm so grateful for that, and I'm so grateful that... actually what we found out was God gives some amazing re-dos when we're faithful and we trust him. And with every new pregnancy and every new birth, we had so many tender moments all over again, and we even went on a cruise on our 20th wedding anniversary-

Dr. Dobson: How about that?

Tracey Russell: ... and it was the most amazing ceremony. And so God is just really faithful to get us the message when he's doing something, and when he's resurrecting a marriage, and when he wants to rebuild a marriage, he can do that.

Dr. Dobson: In closing, Tracey, I want you to talk directly to the woman out there who is totally broken. She has no self-esteem. She has been treated like scum for so long that she believes it. She believes everything that's been said about her. Talk to her about rebuilding that self-esteem, rebuilding that self-worth and that dependence on God that you found.

Tracey Russell: Dr. Dobson, this is the woman I've been waiting to talk to. That was me on the side of the road listening to you, and that was me in the house alone reading the book, and that was me praying night after night, waking up with a pain that hurt in the morning and hurt at night when you go to bed. And so she was me, and I've been waiting 23 years to talk to her, and I don't know if I have the words, but I have the words that I wanted to read from Psalms to read to her.

Dr. Dobson: You do it.

Tracey Russell: And this is Psalm 116. "I love the Lord for he heard my voice. He heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live. The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me. I was overcome by trouble and sorrow, and then I called on the name of the Lord. 'Oh Lord, save me.' The Lord is gracious and righteous. Our God is full of compassion. The Lord protects the simple hearted. When I was in great need, he saved me. Be at rest once more, oh my soul, for the Lord has been good to you."

And I just want to say those words to her, that it's God who's going to be good to her, and it's the Lord who's going to protect her. And there is no failed marriage that God cannot heal. There's no sorrow that he can't bring joy out of. And his love, her faithful love of her heavenly Father and her husband in heaven is far greater than any man in this world.

Dr. Dobson: And if not, some marriages, some people are druggies and alcoholics, and you can't make it work. If that occurs, God hears and answers prayer anyway. Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego said when they were in the fiery furnace, "God can rescue us-"

Tracey Russell: "But if not."

Dr. Dobson: Those three words. "But if not."

Tracey Russell: "But if not."

Dr. Dobson: What a success story. My goodness, Tracey. I can't tell you how much I appreciate the honesty and transparency that you've showed in this program, and you're going to hear about it, because there are a lot of people out there who needed this understanding, and you came all the way from California with Mark.

Tracey Russell: Yes.

Dr. Dobson: But he's a hero too, isn't he?

Tracey Russell: He's a hero too. And I always say for every good story, there's a backstory, and so I just wish you could see our children that adore him, we have four children, the people that adore him, and the godly man, and the man that I love so much that God gave me back. And I tell this story to people now that know him and they say they don't believe me, because that's how much God can restore your marriage, is when they look at us, they're like, "I cannot believe that."

Dr. Dobson: Now, you are a speaker.

Tracey Russell: I am a speaker.

Dr. Dobson: and you are willing to speak.

Tracey Russell: I am. I would love to [crosstalk 00:23:25].

Dr. Dobson: If anybody wants to contact us, we will see that you get that information.

Tracey Russell: Wonderful. Thank you.

Dr. Dobson: I would love to see you speaking all over the place.

Tracey Russell: Thank you.

Dr. Dobson: Women need to hear from you. Men do too.

Tracey Russell: Thank you. It's such an honor. Thank you so much.

Dr. Dobson: Tracey Russell, thank you for being with us.

Tracey Russell: Thank you, Dr. Dobson.

Roger Marsh: An amazing example of how God can heal and restore any struggling marriage. Friend, you've been listening to author and speaker Tracey Russell share her incredible testimony of marital reconciliation, here on Family Talk. Now, at the end of the program, you heard Tracey praise the incredible man her husband Mark has become. Dr. Dobson was so touched by that transformation, that he wanted Mark to share his side of the story as well, so tomorrow you'll hear part three of Dr. Dobson's interview with Tracey and Mark Russell, here on Family Talk. For additional information on any of our guests this month, go to the broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org. Thanks so much for listening, and be sure to join us again next time for another edition of Family Talk's Best of Broadcast.

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